

*The ARTS and the*  
**CHRISTIAN  
IMAGINATION**

ESSAYS ON ART, LITERATURE,  
AND AESTHETICS

*Clyde S. Kilby*

*Edited by William Dyrness  
and Keith Call*



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*The Arts and the Christian Imagination: Essays on Art, Literature, and Aesthetics*

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*For Clyde S. Kilby, with gratitude*



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*Foreword*



REMEMBERING  
CLYDE S. KILBY

My memory of Clyde S. Kilby and his wife, Martha, is constituted by a collage of vivid images. The bright, sunny, second-floor apartment at 620 North Washington in Wheaton, Illinois; the slight Southern accent that he and Martha never lost; the fine English china on which the main meal was served at lunchtime; the guest room that smelled of mothballs where I spent many a night when my parents were away. Uncle Clyde and Aunt Mar populated my earliest memories, and their love and support continued well into my adult life—though as it happened I was never formally a student of Clyde's. He was thrilled when I chose to write about Georges Rouault for my doctoral dissertation—I discover in editing these materials that he had long been devoted to Rouault himself. And when I dared to send a copy of the typescript to him, he promptly approached Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company on my behalf, and they eventually published the work.

This edited volume is meant to introduce a new generation of readers to the work and influence of Clyde Kilby. The materials have been selected both from published and unpublished sources. There is little that qualifies me to present these works to the world—in this sense it is the work of an amateur. But, in the literal sense of the word, being an amateur is not a bad thing.

After all, the etymology of *amateur* originally means “one who loves.” For though I am not a scholar of English literature, I am a lover of both the person and the world he studied. And both the man and his world are well worth knowing. While reading the ample corpus of his writings, I was continually amazed at just how large that world was! Considering he lived within the confines of a small Midwestern Christian college, his tastes were astoundingly catholic. He seemed to be familiar, not only with the whole history of literature, which was his primary teaching field, but also with music and the visual arts. Along with quotations from everyone from Virgil to Paul Ricoeur, his writings are generously sprinkled with fascinating anecdotes. Where in the world did he learn that Amedeo Modigliani, the famous sculptor, could act like a madman tearing off his clothes and bloodying his knees crawling up the stairs to a friend to spend the night? Where did he find the inspiration (and audacity) to use Aldous Huxley’s writing about his drug trips as a model for the creative process? And his knowledge of the details of artists’ lives is impressive—did you know Verdi composed *Falstaff* when almost eighty, just before he died?

Clyde Samuel Kilby was born in Johnson City, Tennessee, on September 26, 1902. His father was a carpenter who could make anything from a coffin to a fine piece of furniture. This was somehow fitting, for Kilby always had the discipline of a craftsman about him. When his father died, Clyde was twelve and had to postpone his future plans for college, working for four years as a court reporter and public stenographer, while he honed his observational skills. After this strange apprenticeship, he was finally able to realize his dream of further study, and in 1929 he graduated from the University of Arkansas. He was the only college graduate in his family.

While in college he met Mississippian Martha Harris. He responded at once to the twinkle in her eye and her ready laughter,



and they married on June 11, 1930. Martha was to become his constant companion and the gracious hostess of his household. Together they moved to Minneapolis where he earned his master's degree in literature from the University of Minnesota. After a brief stint teaching at John Brown University (1931–1933), he moved to New York to begin his PhD studies at New York University (which he finished in 1938, after coming to Wheaton).

In 1935 he was called to Wheaton College in Illinois as Assistant Dean of Students and Instructor in English. Soon he was teaching English full-time, and he became a full professor in 1945. His students remember him as a warm, inviting professor with an easy laugh. Though he and Martha had no children, his students were frequent visitors to their second-floor apartment near the campus. His writing career was launched with the publication of *Poetry and Life* in 1953. This was a beginning text for college students (and, he notes, other interested persons!) lovingly crafted to share his enthusiasm for poetry. The first chapter of this work is included in Section 4 under the title "The World of Poetry." This accessible introduction to poetry is clearly the product of many years of teaching students who had little natural interest or inclination to appreciate the language of poetry. Kilby had already encountered the work of C. S. Lewis, and that same year, in July 1953, Kilby went on a visit to England, determined to meet Lewis. Characteristically, Lewis agreed to meet Kilby in his rooms in Magdalen College, Oxford. They became friends and subsequently stayed in touch (Lewis is said to have teased Kilby about his American drip-dry shirts!). Later, of course, Kilby played a role in introducing Lewis to an American (and especially evangelical) audience.

It is a measure of Kilby's intellectual curiosity that he had already been reading Lewis when they met, well before the Oxford don had become well known in America. According to his

own recollection, Kilby was particularly interested in discovering Lewis's view of the relationship between Christianity and art, and it is not surprising that his own developing views on the subject were to be marked so strongly by Lewis's influence, as well as that of J. R. R. Tolkien, whom he did not meet until 1964. A review of his teaching would show that the 1950s were spent reading and teaching Lewis. But he had other literary interests as well during that decade. An alumni writing grant (1948–1949) had given him time to begin a biography of Wheaton's first president, Jonathan Blanchard, which, after ten years of work, was finally published by Eerdmans in 1959 with the title *Minority of One: The Biography of Jonathan Blanchard*.

Jonathan Blanchard, serving from 1860 to 1882, was a fiery, crusading abolitionist and educator. Both Jonathan Blanchard and his son Charles (who continued in the presidency of Wheaton College until 1926, just nine years before Kilby joined the faculty) were fierce defenders of the idea that "all truth is God's truth." In these writers whom he did so much to popularize in the last half of his life, Kilby found very different but equally courageous voices writing within that same conviction. In an article describing that high view of education, Kilby concludes: "They [the Blanchards] believed that all truth worthy of the name is from God and they held that the primary aim of all education is to understand that transcendental relationship between the earthy and the divine." The words could apply as much to the Oxonians Lewis and Tolkien as it did to the Midwesterners Jonathan and Charles Blanchard. But there is a huge difference, for the British Christians were vastly more aware of the power of the imagination. In an account of his one meeting with Lewis, Kilby recalls telling Lewis of Blanchard's judgment that fiction was at best a "well-told lie," an opinion both Lewis and Kilby rejected. So in defending Lewis and others, Kilby was opening a door on a world that had

been closed to the College's founder, however much he admired Blanchard on other grounds.

The 1960s proved to be the most productive period of his career. In 1961 he published a small book on aesthetics, and in 1964, he published his well-received introduction to the work of Lewis, *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis*.<sup>1</sup> I still remember, as a student at Wheaton, the excitement (and pride!) we felt when this book received a favorable review in the *New York Times Book Review*. No evangelical writer that we knew of had received such attention, certainly not anyone from Wheaton College! In 1964 he was named the Senior Teacher of the year, and in 1965 he was instrumental in founding the Marion E. Wade Collection of Lewis's letters and manuscripts. Initially this was to be a "Lewis" collection, but its scope was soon expanded to collect the works and manuscripts of significant Christian writers associated with Lewis, most of whom belonged to the Inklings: Owen Barfield, Dorothy Sayers, G. K. Chesterton, George MacDonald, Charles Williams, and J. R. R. Tolkien. Later in the '60s Kilby's biography of David Brainerd appeared, and he edited two collections of Lewis's writings.<sup>2</sup> During this period his growing impact on colleagues and former students was becoming increasingly evident. This appreciation found formal recognition in the publication of *Imagination and the Spirit: Essays in Literature and the Christian Faith Presented to Clyde S. Kilby*, edited by former student and colleague Charles A. Huttar.<sup>3</sup> The level of scholarship of this collection, many

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1 Clyde Kilby, *Christianity and Aesthetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961); *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964).

2 Kilby's biography of Brainerd appeared as part of an edited volume: *Heroic Colonial Christians*, ed. Russell T. Hitt (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966); Kilby (and Lewis), *Letters to an American Lady* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967); Kilby, *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1968).

3 Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971. Appreciative foreword offered by Claude Walsh.

pieces done by former students, others by colleagues, is eloquent testimony to the influence of Clyde Kilby.

In 1973 he became the curator of what was then known as the Wade Collection, and that same year he was named author of the year by the Illinois Association of Teachers of English. Giving his time to the Wade Collection allowed him to focus more on his research and writing, which resulted in book-length studies of Tolkien and Lewis.<sup>4</sup> Kilby formally retired in 1977, though he stayed on at the Wade Collection until 1980 when he moved with Martha to his beloved Columbus, Mississippi, the location of Martha's childhood home, where for some time they had lived for six months of the year. During his time at the Wade Collection, I stopped by to see him, as it turned out, for the last time. He warmly invited me in, saying, "Come on in and let's chew the rag a little while." We talked of Georges Rouault, Wheaton, my family, and, of course, C. S. Lewis. Clyde Kilby died in Columbus on October 18, 1986; Martha lived there until August 2004.

This collection offers a sampler of Kilby's work under four headings: his reflections on "Christianity, the Arts, and Aesthetics"; on "the Vocation of the Artist"; on "Faith and the Role of the Imagination"; and on "Poetry, Literature, and the Imagination." A second volume of his writings appearing contemporaneously with this one, *A Well of Wonder: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and the Inklings* (Paraclete Press, 2016), focuses on Lewis and Tolkien—though, given the role these writers played in his thought, references to these giants are to be found throughout this collection of materials as well. Herein then you will find an introduction by a family friend rather than a scholarly

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4 Clyde Kilby, *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1975); *Images of Salvation in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1978).

commentary. This collection of work is a long overdue tribute to his thinking and influence. In this collection we celebrate both the man and the continuing impact of his writings.

*William Dyrness*  
*Pasadena, California*  
*Winter 2016*



## ELEVEN RESOLUTIONS TO GUIDE LIFE<sup>1</sup>

1. I shall sometimes look back at the freshness of vision I had in childhood and try, at least for a little while, to be, in the words of Lewis Carroll, the “child of the pure unclouded brow, and dreaming eyes of wonder.”
2. At least once a day I shall look steadily up at the sky and remember that I, a consciousness with a conscience, am on a planet traveling in space with wonderfully mysterious things above and about me.
3. Instead of the accustomed idea of a mindless and endless evolutionary change to which we can neither add nor subtract, I shall suppose the universe guided by an Intelligence which, as Aristotle said of Greek drama, requires a beginning, a middle, and an end. I think this will save me from the cynicism expressed by Bertrand Russell before his death, when he said: “There is darkness without, and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendor, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment and then nothing.”
4. I shall not fall into the falsehood that this day, or any day, is merely another ambiguous and plodding twenty-four hours, but rather a unique event, filled, if I so wish, with worthy potentialities. I shall not be fool enough to suppose that trouble and pain are wholly evil parentheses in my existence

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Kilby distributed this “guide” in mimeographed form to students in his classes at the beginning of each semester. (Editor)

but just as likely ladders to be climbed toward moral and spiritual manhood.

5. I shall not turn my life into a thin straight line which prefers abstractions to reality. I shall know what I am doing when I abstract, which of course I shall often have to do.
6. I shall not demean my own uniqueness by envy of others. I shall stop boring into myself to discover what psychological or social categories I might belong to. Mostly I shall simply forget about myself and do my work.
7. I shall open my eyes and ears. Once every day I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud, or a person. I shall not then be concerned at all to ask what they are but simply be glad that they are. I shall joyfully allow them the mystery of what Lewis calls their “divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic” existence.
8. I shall follow Charles Darwin’s advice and turn frequently to imaginative things such as good literature and good music, preferably, as C. S. Lewis suggests, an old book and timeless music.
9. I shall not allow the devilish onrush of this century to usurp all my energies but will instead, as Charles Williams suggest, “fulfill the moment as the moment.” I shall try to live well just now because the only time that exists is now.
10. If for nothing more than the sake of a change of view, I shall assume my ancestry to be from the heavens rather than the caves.



11. Even if I turn out to be wrong, I shall bet my life on the assumption that this world is not idiotic, neither run by an absentee landlord, but that today, this very day, some stroke is being added to the cosmic canvas that in due course I shall understand with joy as a stroke made by an Architect who calls Himself Alpha and Omega.

*Clyde S. Kilby*



SECTION 1

CHRISTIANITY,  
THE ARTS, AND  
AESTHETICS





## *Introduction*



## WILLIAM DYRNESS

Clyde Kilby was at work throughout his career on the questions of art and aesthetics. This is especially evident in the 450-page manuscript with the title *Christianity and Aesthetics* that he left behind when he died and which I have had in my library. Though it is undated, it is clearly a further development of ideas and themes broached in his 1961 booklet. In 1955 at the prompting of the philosophy faculty, he had begun to teach a course entitled “A Christian Philosophy of the Arts,” and it was in this context that he surely developed his thinking and began to compose this work on art and aesthetics. I have no memory of how the manuscript came into my possession, though I suspect it was sent to me either by Clyde or, more likely, by Martha after his death. I do remember Lyle Dorsett, Director of the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, telling me in the late 1980s that no one was working on it, and they had no plans to publish the material. I still hope one day the whole manuscript will be published, but meanwhile it seems appropriate that this anthology of Kilby’s work begins with a substantial selection of his unpublished writing on aesthetics. We have accordingly selected a portion of the lengthy manuscript to publish in this format.

In 1961 Kilby published a little book entitled *Christianity and Aesthetics*, in an InterVarsity Press (IVP) series on “Contemporary Christian Thought.” Though small (thirty pages), it indicates an early revival of evangelical interest in these issues, even before

Francis Schaeffer and Hans Rookmaaker appeared on the scene. It was reprinted at least once in 1969, and so it must have been well received in the campus ministries and Christian colleges for which it was written. This is an early indication that Kilby had been thinking about contemporary art and the implications of this for Christians. Because it has long been out of print, and because of its enduring worth, we have elected to reprint it in this volume.

Several comments may be appropriate by way of introduction to Kilby's aesthetics. First, a dominant, indeed overriding concern of Kilby's writing was what might be called an apologetic for art and aesthetics for evangelicals. The constituency that Kilby sought to address—students and alumni of Wheaton, and others like them—struggled with their fundamentalist and separatist inclinations. Indeed, Kilby himself seemed at times to reflect these struggles. He asks in the preface of the unpublished aesthetics manuscript: "Have I as a Christian more, less, or exactly the same right to enjoy the arts as others who may not profess a Christian view?" Kilby means to address those who are asking themselves questions like this. This theme reappears frequently throughout the manuscript and in the shorter volume published by InterVarsity Press. Christian colleges, he laments, do little to help students discover their highest gifts; Christianity, he says, is presented as "undeviatingly vocational"—with a consistent tilt in the direction of missions and ministry.

He concludes the manuscript with a long chapter specifically on evangelicals and the arts. Why do these Christians neither enjoy nor produce the best art? He discusses and dismisses various suggested causes, such as evangelicals' minority (and embattled) social status. Rather, he says, they have lacked, perhaps out of fear, the "vital, creative and generative vigor" that is central to the life of the imagination, so the art produced is dishonest and simplistic.

There is much to be learned from Kilby's analysis, and some of the best bits are included here. But the question we might ask today is to what extent this complaint is valid today. Is his worry as relevant today as it was when he wrote a generation or more ago? This is not the place to attempt to fully answer this question, but we might briefly suggest that even if his complaints have a familiar ring, in many ways—indeed partly because of the influence Clyde Kilby and his many students—they are no longer true. To name only the more institutional and visible aspects of the evangelical presence, one has only to review journals like *Christianity and Literature*, *Seven* (a journal that was birthed out of the Marion E. Wade Center, based on the collection of papers and materials held there), *Books and Culture: A Christian Review*, *Image*, or organizations like Christians in the Visual Arts to see a vital evangelical presence in cultural conversations. Notwithstanding these encouraging signs, enough of the old separatism exists in certain churches and Christian colleges (and other institutional forms such as missions) that Kilby's appeal is still worth reading.

As I noted in the introduction, one comes away from reading Kilby's writings on aesthetics amazed at the breadth of his knowledge and reading. He did not let the dearth of specifically Christian reflection stand in the way of his ecumenical reading and thinking. Though he does cite the prominent Christian voices—Nathan Scott and Jacques Maritain in addition to Lewis and his friends—he ranges widely among secular thinkers like D. S. Savage and Bernard Bosanquet.

The further comment that might help introduce Kilby's aesthetics is to point out that he is working within a particular literary framework. If the first comment relates to his own social and cultural setting, this one seeks to highlight his literary (and philosophical) context. For Kilby, art and aesthetics has to do with beauty, and therefore its study is occupied with the highest

expressions of such beauty, all that is embodied in the “classics.” Here Kilby betrays his orientation toward classical aesthetics (something I address in the introduction to Section 2). He writes: “Aesthetics inquires into the reasons for the beautiful both in nature and art and of the manner in which the beautiful is identified with the mind and emotions of people.” This focus on specific qualities inherent in objects to which the person responds, and which affects him or her wholly, implies that the appropriate response is deeply personal and individual. One takes up a uniquely “aesthetic” attitude toward the object, one of aesthetic contemplation. While not completely autonomous in the sense of “art for art’s sake,” against which Kilby frequently rails, art objects do deserve the largest possible freedom of expression. Art exists, Kilby notes, in its own right. This is because beauty in its truest and deepest sense is connected with being, which ultimately is grounded in God.

In “Modern Art’s Pursuit of Form” Kilby focuses on a contemporary publication by Selden Rodman, *The Eye of Man*,<sup>1</sup> which was making a stir in secular publications. Written for the recently founded *Christianity Today*, this review extends the mission of that pioneering magazine into the arts—surely one of the earliest articles to do so. Rodman’s book, Kilby believed, had important implications for Christians and should be on their reading list. Rodman had argued that in modern art content had suffered “almost total eclipse.” As a result, form had shriveled into mere decoration. In response Kilby develops an early version of what is surely one of his most original contributions to aesthetics, his conception of form—which was to be more fully developed

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1 Kilby writing in the fall of 1959 is referring to Rodman’s work *The Eye of Man: Form and Content in Western Painting* (New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1955). But a similar study was published under the title of *The Insiders: Rejection and Rediscovery of Man in the Arts of Our Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1960). This is a critical study evaluating abstract expressionism and nonrepresentational art as a rejection of humanity and traditional values.



later in his aesthetics manuscript. Over against what he calls the “Hollywoodish symbol” (!), content with deep conviction finds appropriate and striking form. Kilby develops Rodman’s argument by noting that true form, for the Christian, is exemplified by the Spirit-filled life. It is more closely connected with being than doing. We are, Paul says, God’s poems (Eph. 2:10). Form disconnected from such depths becomes sterile, a mere formalism. Here Kilby’s Platonic heritage is on full display, though thoroughly assimilated to his Christian faith. The “form” of art opens the art object to the depth that it represents, which suggests that form is closer to myth (what Lewis called “the new world of meaning taking permanent root in one’s soul”). Appropriate form is the expression of the deep call of reality at the center of things, in pursuit of which the artist can at the same time be completely herself and completely God’s.

Kilby goes on here to develop his own notion of form. Form in art is ultimately grounded in the forms found in nature, and in the social history of people; form is finally a feature of design, though certainly not only that, and it expresses the particular values of its creator embodied in the material elements. Above all, form expresses the depth of reality, which in its final being is ultimately grounded in God.

But how is it grounded in God? Kilby frequently references this relationship without specifying it. Here his influences are clearly the Anglican theology of Lewis and the Anglo-Catholicism of Tolkien. To be fair, this is not surprising, for there was certainly no Protestant alternative for him to develop, or least Kilby, it appears, was not aware of it (though he does quote Abraham Kuyper from time to time). Indeed, his expression of classics gives voice to a particular neo-romantic notion of creativity, as this is expressed through metaphysical notions usually identified with the Catholic tradition. It is not surprising that a recent theologian to give voice

to this idea of “classics” is the Roman Catholic theologian David Tracy, who argues that the classics express both the social and cultural being of a people and a deeper understanding of God’s presence in history. One thinks also of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who highlighted the form of God’s radiance especially as this is seen in the Incarnation.

Evangelicals certainly have much to learn from this tradition, but they might find their theological bearings in somewhat different ways. As Tracy himself points out, Protestants have tended to develop their understanding of culture less in terms of analogy than in the form of a dialectic—that is, in the tension between God and the world, sin and grace, and the promised future and painful present. This typically leads Protestants to focus less on beauty as the final orientation of aesthetics and more on a holistic understanding of life lived aesthetically (as Nicholas Wolterstorff has argued) or in the allusive character of creative activity (to put it in Calvin Seerveld’s terms). Indeed, Kilby resonates with these writers when he connects grace and gracefulness. Further thought might lead one to seeing art and aesthetics as grounded directly in the Trinitarian life of God as this is displayed in creation and redemptive history, as Jeremy Begbie and others have done. All of this is simply to suggest that the Christian conversation has developed a great deal since Kilby was wrestling with his aesthetic theory. But his role as a pioneer of this discussion is secure.

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## *Chapter 1*



# THE CHRISTIAN AND THE ARTS

Why is there inside man the desire, even the burden, to create? What is the source of this desire? What is the right fulfillment of it? What is the nature of the art process, and how does it function? To what extent is the whole nature of the artist involved in his undertaking? Is the artist, as Wordsworth said, a man speaking to men? What is the artist's place in the cultural life of his time?

Alongside these questions are others which involved me as an orthodox Christian. Should my belief in the fundamentals of the Christian faith make any difference in my attitude toward the arts? Have I as a Christian more, less, or exactly the same right to enjoy the arts as others who may not profess a Christian view? May a Christian devote his life to the creation or study of music, painting, literature, and the other arts? Are the arts dangerous to the spiritual life? Are they to be cultivated, to be shunned, or to be simply ignored? What attitude in particular should the Christian take toward modern art?

It was such questions as these that led to the present study.

A few orthodox Christians feel an outright antagonism to the arts. Many others are relatively indifferent to them. Others, and I think the number in this class is growing, would sincerely like to know whether the Christian faith and a deep devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives prohibits more than a cursory interest

in the arts. They would like to determine as exactly as they can the relation of their faith to contemporary culture and the extent to which the Scriptures teach participation in that culture. It is chiefly to this group that I address myself in the following pages.

## I. Art, Aesthetics, and Christianity

See! There is never dignity in a concourse of men,  
save only as some spiritual gleam hearteneth the herd.

Robert Bridges

O Master-maker! Thy exultant art  
Goes forth in making makers.

George MacDonald

It is not an accident that religion, philosophy, and aesthetics have been associated throughout the history of human thought. They belong together because they identify man in his least brutish aspect. Their concern is with the ultimates rather than the *obiter dicta* of existence. They wish to discern and celebrate the lasting rather than passing, values rather than occasions, wholeness rather than disparity. By their concern with meaning they want to ease life somewhat of the fragmentary and disjointed. "If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance," says Albert Camus, who also holds that one of the deepest desires of man is for unity.<sup>2</sup>

I use the word *religion* in order to include our magnificent Greek and Roman heritage, as well as all other thinkers who have embraced large and significant ideas of humanity and the meaning of life. This essay, however, undertakes not simply a religious but a

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2    Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 5, and passim.

Christian look at the arts, and it assumes that there is a difference between them. In our time it is unfortunately necessary to describe what one means by Christian, and I want to dispose of the matter as simply as possible by saying that I mean by the word someone who believes in the fundamentals of the faith as expressed in great creedal documents such as the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Nicene Creed.

Other things equal, a philosophy which holds to God as the great Cause is likely to understand more completely than one which finds its ultimates in nature, human nature, or the nature of things, for the very idea of cause and effect is enlarged in the one case far above the other. Bosanquet reminds us of Erigena's "teleology without an end" and of his application of the rationale to the world through and through, not simply to the choicer aspects of nature, thus upholding the conviction of universal significance and improving upon the Aristotelian idea of imitation which could make nothing beautiful which is not given as beautiful. "It is easy to see," says Bosanquet, "how hopeful is such an idea, and how rich a prospect it opens, in comparison with the notion of the beautiful as finally and unalterably given to perception."<sup>3</sup> The Christian's universal is infinitely larger than the universal of others, so large indeed that the word is awkward in its application at all, for the Christian's universal reaches to the sovereign God.

Aesthetics, of course, is not Christianity any more than beauty is God. Genuine Christianity will never make the mistake of which non-Christians are sometimes guilty, that of substituting art for God. Plato says that it is a properly educated man's consciousness of superiority to slaves which enables him to treat them well. It is the same between Christianity and beauty. While analogies between the two are striking, analogy by its nature applies not to identical but only similar things. Art has exciting

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3 Bernard Bosanquet, *History of Aesthetics*, 143.

relations with truth, even with the Truth, but only derivatively. It has an autonomy and even a delightful sovereignty, but neither is absolute, being similar to the autonomy and sovereignty of man rather than God.

Beauty, then, is not king but only prime minister. Not a servant, it nevertheless delights to serve because of its concinnity with the king and his entire kingdom. Its relation is not that of antagonism but of love. This Christianity avoids either of two unwarranted extremes: the elevation of beauty to equality with God and the degradation of it to pretty ornamentation, without essential value. In the same way, by believing man a responsible creature before God, Christianity upholds the adequate presentation of life as a sufficient aim for art rather than either the deifying or sentimentalizing of man on the one hand or the brutalizing of him on the other.

Just before he died in 1940, Eric Gill declared that art had shifted from a holy and communicative act to an exclusively aesthetic one aiming only to give pleasure, so that in a painting of a Madonna we care less for significance than for a pleasing arrangement of materials. But he noted on the other hand that in “proclaiming the essentially evangelical nature of all human works we are not suggesting that the whole world ought to turn itself into one great ‘church furniture’ shop. The contrary would be nearer the truth, we ought rather to abolish church furniture shops altogether.”<sup>4</sup> It is good to see signs that the wide breach between Christianity and the arts is closing up. Desirous as it might be from a merely analytical point of view, there is indeed no valid separation of the aesthetic and the ethical. Clear as a trail through the forest may appear, it is valueless if it leads in the wrong direction, and this I think is inevitable when beauty is separated from Ultimate Beauty.

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4 Eric Gill, *Artists on Art*, edited by Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, 456.



Christianity holds all valuable things to be valuable toward an end simply because man himself is purposed and purposive, being created *imago Dei* with all the rights, privileges, and obligations appertaining. The Incarnation prepared the way for Christians to discern value in small, even crude, things, just as Christ took lamp stands, a mustard seed, a bit of money, or a wineskin to symbolize great spiritual significance. Such a perspective prevents all likelihood of artistic snobbery.

Although I have often indicated relationships between Christianity and beauty, I have had in mind nothing more than the elucidation of the latter. I will add, however, that there are places where for me at least the art process makes theology clearer than through any other explanation. A student completing three years of seminary training wrote me of his disappointment over what he called the lack of style among young theologians. "A sense of style, a feeling for good and bad style, and a determination to recognize and choose between them can only be a reality when style becomes a part of the person. . . . The students here seem utterly unable to discern that this has profound implications. Style, I suspect, may ultimately be a religious question." That I agree with this last remark will, I think, appear in the following pages.

In upholding a Christian view of aesthetics as the one best covering the facts, I do not mean to approve the so-called devotional art of our time. The alienation between Christianity and art is regrettable for both the Christian and the artist. Secularized art has been forced to find its *raison d'être* and its "absolute" in nature, pleasure, the subconscious, and the like or else in a formal autonomy which amounts to art for art's sake. On the other hand, Christianity, or at least branches of it, has for the most part been content with an almost unbelievably enfeebled and debased art. Plaster saints, bleeding hearts, and garish crucifixes among

Catholics are matched by sentimentalized hymns, jazzy choruses, and impudently familiar prayers among Protestants, and both are overburdened with shoddy novels and trite poetry. Although not even in the most “realistic” decades of our century has the church been without men of combined devotion and genuine artistic talent, the chasm between art and the Christian tradition is only too apparent.

It is hardly necessary to remark that the break between Christianity and art is only a single instance of today’s spiritual malaise. S. E. Frost says that in one voluminous anthology of modern philosophy there is no mention of the soul and only a few mentions of immortality.<sup>5</sup> We are in the peculiar condition of seeing thought itself trimmed to the size of scientific method and this in the teeth of protests from most of the leading scientists of our century. We are scared of imagination, scared of the really fruitful generalization, scared very little of the authority of God but deeply afraid of the authority of “scholarship.” Even the Prince Hamlets have become “politic, cautious, and meticulous.” Without for a moment denying the fruitfulness of scholarship or the value of reason, the Christian may celebrate the glorious realization that God lives, that nature and man are His creations, and that the unity and beauty of the universe reside in Him.

It has appeared to me that we are closest to the center of aesthetics when we ask the simple question, what is a person? My sincere conviction in the following pages is that our true human identity is nothing less than *imago Dei* and that there is no adequate accounting for our creativeness apart from this fundamental conception. I make no pretensions to have resolved the great aesthetic questions, but I have no doubt at all of having tackled them from the right perspective.

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5 S. E. Frost, *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers*, 190.

## II. The Nature of Beauty

Nowadays they want to explain everything. But if they could explain a picture, it wouldn't be art. Shall I tell you what I think are the two qualities of art? It must be indescribable and it must be inimitable.

Auguste Renoir

The world of creation cannot yet see Reality.

Romans 8:19 (J. B. PHILLIPS)

Although Aldous Huxley's little book called *The Doors of Perception* was not intended as a treatise on beauty, it contains so many valuable inferences on that subject that I want to use it as the foundation of my initial discussion. One does not have to agree with all of Huxley's conclusions or with his background belief in Eastern mysticism to appreciate the many hints in his study as to the possible aesthetic analogy of his experience. His book is actually a report on the effects of mescaline, the active principle of peyote, a drug derived from cactus and long venerated by Indians of the American Southwest. Under experimental supervision, Huxley took four-tenths of a gram of mescaline and, through the course of several hours, recorded the results. The fact that mescaline is closely related to a natural substance produced in the body encourages the analogy.

### THE TRANSCENDENTAL NATURE OF BEAUTY

Possibly the most interesting fact of all is that this book is filled with religious ideas, images, and phrases. Under the power of mescaline Huxley saw what he believed Adam had seen on the morning of his creation, "the miracle, moment by moment, of

naked existence” and a “corner of Eden before the Fall.”<sup>6</sup> He saw with “cleansed perception,” with “profundity of significance,” and with transfigured eyes. He saw the “pure existence” belonging to “another order,” an order “beyond the power of even the highest art to express.” He believed he saw “how things really are” and because of this felt the pathetic imbecility, as he calls it, of man’s assuming anything however commonplace to be less than divine. He discovered each individual fragment of things to be representative of “a Higher Order” and life transfigured with a “transcendental otherness” by which even commonplace buildings glowed “like fragments of the New Jerusalem” and were charged “with all the meaning and the mystery of existence.” He saw that all things ought to be perceived as “infinite and holy” and that one of the principal appetites of the soul is man’s longing to transcend himself and come into contact with a higher reality, to attain “the heroism, the holiness, the sublimity” to which he constantly aspires.

These are the kinds of expressions which have often been used of the aesthetic experience, though perhaps never so many in so small a compass. Art is commonly declared a means of enhancing existence, of bringing man into touch with realities that transcend the mundane world in which he normally lives. Art has no other object, says Bergson, than to push aside our utilitarian and conventional conceptions so as to bring us face-to-face with “reality itself.”<sup>7</sup> A work of art catches us up, says C. S. Lewis, in “an unforgettable intensity of life—haunted forever with the sense of vast dignities and strange sorrows and teased with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls.”<sup>8</sup> Says Sir Arthur Eddington: “It is because

6 Because of the brevity of Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*, I have taken the liberty of omitting page numbers for my quotations from it. I am grateful to the author and also Harper and Brothers for permission to make use of this book.

7 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan, 1921).

8 C. S. Lewis, quoted in *Theology Today* 14 (October 1957).

the mind, the weaver of illusion, is also the only guarantor of reality that reality is always to be sought at the base of illusion.”<sup>9</sup> And Aristotle held that the poet transforms the world into what ought to be. It was into some such world that Huxley was transported by the mescaline experience.

It is interesting to speculate on the sort of world which would make the artistic enterprise unnecessary, perhaps two sorts of worlds. One is easy enough to conceive, the world of the animal. Sitting in the woods on a magnificent spring morning, Wordsworth felt not only that the singing birds were filled with pleasure but that even the budding twigs and flowers enjoyed the balmy air.<sup>10</sup> Anyone who loves nature will have experienced similar feelings, but there is little proof that animals, not to mention plants, have aesthetic sensibility, at least any at all comparable to the elevated experience of man in the presence of beauty. We may therefore assume that cattle, let us say, do not need an aesthetic world. But the other condition under which aesthetics might become unnecessary is both far more exciting and far more difficult to conceive. Would it not be a world in which the ultimate significance and being of all things were apprehended with immediate and pristine clarity, a world so apprehended because, as Milton says of Adam and Eve, “so lively shines in them divine resemblance”?<sup>11</sup>

The difficulty perhaps resides in the word *apprehended*, for one must ask whether the fall of man has not produced in him fundamentally the need to apprehend and whether unfallen man did not simply dwell within the pale of both beauty and truth as well as holiness. Not that he was one with these values, swallowed up in some universal soul or theosophical absorption, for the Scripture is clear that unfallen man had self-identification,

9 Arthur Eddington, *Nature of the Physical World*.

10 William Wordsworth, “Lines Written in Early Spring.”

11 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV, 363–64.

but that he contemplated these things free from tension and apprehended them in their veridical import.

Bergson attempted to describe the condition in which man would find beauty unnecessary:

Could reality come into direct contact with sense and consciousness, could we enter into immediate communion with things and with ourselves, probably art would be useless, or rather we should all be artists, for then our soul would continually vibrate in perfect accord with nature. Our eyes, aided by memory, would carve out in space and fix in time the most inimitable of pictures. Hewn in the living marble of the human form, fragments of statues, beautiful as the relics of antique statuary, would strike the passing glance. Deep in our souls we should hear the strains of our inner life's unbroken melody—a music that is oft-times gay, but more frequently plaintive and always original.<sup>12</sup>

The veil that interposes between nature and ourselves, even between ourselves and our own consciousness, says Bergson, would be abolished. Apart from his use of the word *nature*, which seems decidedly inadequate by comparison with the language either of Huxley or the Scriptures, one may agree. The deep-seated desire of man that the veil between him and “reality”—better between him and Reality—be removed is the cause in him of a lifelong tension which at its highest human manifestation produces the world's art. Is not the universality of art and of the creative process the evidence of that light which enlightens every man?

Whatever philosophical or religious stand one takes, it is difficult to avoid the overwhelming assurance, first, that man

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12 Henri Bergson, *Laughter*.

intensely desires something which he does not have, and, second, that at times he is capable of experiencing enough fulfillment at once to ravish him and sequentially point the finger toward the “Higher Order” suggested by Huxley. The creation and enjoyment of art is man’s best achievement and his finest sign of being more than animal.

Under the influence of mescaline, Huxley experienced a world beyond language and even beyond symbol. He calls it the world of Is-ness, Suchness, of Being-Awareness-Bliss. Three flowers in a vase before him shone with “their own inner light” and seemed to quiver “under the pressure of significance with which they were charged.” They signified “nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence.” He saw even the “miraculous tabularity” of the bamboo legs of a chair and all this in what he says he can describe only as “the sacramental vision of reality . . . a world where everything shone with the Inner Light, and was infinite in its significance.” It is true, says Huxley, that man, being what he is, has no alternative but to take refuge in the world of common sense and conventions, but this is because he is “not holy enough” to live with reality.

#### THE NOT-SELF

Perhaps the most significant detail of Huxley’s evaluation of his mescaline experience is what he calls its “blessed Not-I” aspect. He distinguishes two extremely different selves, or rather a self and a not-self, describing the former as an “interfering neurotic who tries to run the show,” as hellish, as cheap, shoddy, and existing in a closed and cramped universe, and as something

another part of him could look on from a distance. But the not-self had the power of releasing objects so that they could actually be seen, of providing awareness of Mind-at-Large, and of apprehending the higher activity. I take it that this not-self of Huxley's is equivalent to Martin Buber's "real self" in his remark, "The real self appears only when it enters into relation with the Other."<sup>13</sup> Huxley points out how men use liquor and opiates to be rid of this real self. And again it seems to me that Huxley's discussion throws interesting light not only on aesthetics but on the scriptural command to deny self. Great art enables one to transcend the shoddy and dictatorial self which has possession of most of us much of the time by dismissing or escaping this self through "living into" the symbolized presentation of reality in that art. On the Christian side, Huxley's remarks suggest the idea that the scriptural command to deny self is less because of the *per se* evil of the self than its constantly eclipsing spiritual realities and destroying fellowship with the Father.

#### THE MORAL IMPERATIVE

It has been proved over and over that true art and a theistic, purposive universe are altogether compatible. The supreme example is the Bible itself, which in turn has been the foundation for the great art of the Western world, enabling artists to conceive of man free, complicated, mysterious, and capable of becoming godlike or devilish. So Milton conceived man and intending "to justify the ways of God to man" produced a masterpiece. So Bunyan conceived man with the same functional aim produced a very different sort of masterpiece and, as one has said, "proved that the alleged antithesis between art and moral idealism is unreal."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Vera Brittain, *Valiant Pilgrim: The Story of John Bunyan and Puritan England*, 414.



The theistic nature of things bequeaths a great freedom to art as to everything else and rejoices in the individuality which is at the soul of human creativity, but the theistic nature of things forces all self-contained autonomy and absoluteness to destroy itself.

Huxley says that his experience with mescaline delivered him from the world of moral judgments as from that of utilitarian considerations but that a sense of ought-ness suffused his way of seeing. "This is how one ought to see," he said over and over to himself as he looked at the flowers and books before him. "In intervals between his revelations [. . .] and the mescaline taker is apt to feel that, though in one way everything is supremely as it should be, in another there is something wrong." Is this not precisely the biblical view of reality—on the one hand a creation supremely beautiful and worthy simply as an existent, and on the other, a creation which at every point suggests a moral-immoral universe? And is it not also the really correct view of art—that is, beauty but not beauty unrelated to the moral order of the world, not even beauty-with-value but beauty-*qua*-value and value-*qua*-beauty?

It must be confessed that to a large extent aesthetics is the attempt to explain the inexplicable, to write down in logical discourse the account of experience which, like religious experience, transcends rationality. One can, for illustration, define poetry as "metrical composition," or one can fling out as Carl Sandburg did and call it a combination of hyacinths and biscuits, and even if in this instance the second definition seems as inadequate as the first, one can at least understand the good intention to maintain a true equivalency between the reality and its explanation.

It seems to me that Huxley's experience under mescaline bears just that transrational obliquity which convinces us of some of the basic conditions which make art both necessary and delightful to man. It suggests that man is fearfully and wonderfully made; that

reality, even the commonplace, bears the stamp of God; that man is forever beset by longing for another and better order of things; that an essential part of his consciousness is a craving for Being; that man wishes a selfhood above animal selfishness; and that symbols, however valuable, are of necessity less than the realities they symbolize.

### III. The Pattern of Life

Everything God made is good, and is meant to be gratefully used, not despised.

1 Timothy 4:4 (J. B. PHILLIPS)

Through the Son God made the whole universe, and to the Son He has ordained that all creation shall ultimately belong. This Son, Radiance of the glory of God, flawless Expression of the nature of God, Himself the Upholding Principle of all that is. . .

Hebrews 1:2-3 (J. B. PHILLIPS)

We have a mental habit which makes it much easier for us to explain the miraculous in natural terms than to explain the natural in miraculous terms; yet the latter is as necessary as the former.

T. S. Eliot