Nineteenth Century Studies

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Is a Myth a Lie?
A Victorian Answer
in the Paintings of
George Frederic Watts

By the late eighteenth century, the validity of mythic material had been seriously undercut by the rise of rationalism and scientific materialism. Nonetheless, even in this context, George Frederic Watts produced mythological paintings that struck a powerful response in his viewers. The popular and revered Victorian painter created billboard-sized paintings that expressed neither the validity of traditional myths nor the validity of reason, but rather the absolute validity of uncertainty. As David Loshak states, Watts's meaning “could be summed up in one word: the 'Unknowable'.” Perhaps surprisingly, Watts's mythological paintings made the unknown a springboard for action and thereby offered a release from the iconography of despair found in many Romantic works.

Mythmaking earlier in the nineteenth century stemmed from a desperate attempt to fill the void created by two devastating notions that had gained force. The first relegated Christianity to the status of superstition, and the second suggested that rationality itself might be a myth. The foundations of European culture were left in ruin. Following this collapse, Napoleon tried to convince himself and others of his own mythical importance by presenting himself as a Roman Emperor, Jesus Christ, and a Divine Right King (figure 1). Francois-René Chateaubriand, in his popular novel Atala, tried to convince himself and others that Christianity was a beautiful myth, and therefore worth adopting (figure 2). Mythmaking could be a cynical and propagandistic operation, as in the case of Napoleon, or mythmaking could fulfill highly intimate and personal needs for structure and meaning as it did for Chateaubriand. In both instances, mythmaking involved willfully living a lie.

For that reason, some sought to destroy myth. The German painter, Caspar David Friedrich, numbered among the myth destroyers. In his The
Figure 1. Ingres, “Napoléon sur le trône impérial, 1804.”
Courtesy of Musée de L’Armée, Paris.
Figure 2. Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson, Atala au tombeau, 1808. Courtesy of Louvre, Paris/Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 3. Caspar David Friedrich. Der Mönch am Meer entstanden, 1808-10. Courtesy of Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie, Berlin (West). Photograph by Jörg P. Anders.
Monk by the Seashore (1809-10; Schloss Charlottenburg, West Berlin, figure 3), a small lone figure is lost in a darkened indeterminate, endless landscape. This is the image of the Romantic soul, searching but never finding, in a world without borders and without order, where mystery and confusion reign. Significantly Friedrich paints a monk, a monk who cannot find the object of his quest and thereby depicts the isolation and pain of life in a world stripped of its religion. In his Abbey in an Oak Forest (1809-10; Schloss Charlottenburg, West Berlin, figure 4), Friedrich paints a sad attempt to bring religion back to a world in which it has died. The barren tree, the cold earth, and the shattered stones give little sign of hope, only a sense of longing for a better time, before the destruction of everything of value.²

The myth destroyers, such as Friedrich, lost more than religion. Nature could no longer be trusted, for it was unjust and irrational. J. M. W. Turner spent most of his career attacking the mythic view of nature as just, beautiful and knowable. In his Sun of Venice Going to Sea (1843; Tate Gallery, London, figure 5), Turner uses splashes of yellow and white in a sun-filled scene of a fishing boat. The bold, upward-moving lines in this painting give a great sense of optimism and joy. The ship’s sails are full of wind and there is every indication that a glorious day lies ahead, but Turner attaches to this painting a set of verses from his poem “The Fallacies of Hope” indicating that these men sail off to their deaths.³ Nature is deceiving them. What we see is a lie. Nature cannot be trusted. The beautiful may turn out to be terrible. Not only is the world unfair, it is senseless. For the sophisticated individuals of the nineteenth century, such myth destroying was an obsession. They read Romantic poetry, listened to Romantic music, looked at Romantic paintings, and then often killed themselves.

In the wake of the myth destroyers, Watts investigated ways to present myths that would speak to the whole of society without presenting old fictions or new ones. Remarkably, Watts found a way to create powerful myths that united his audience and gave them direction. Watts did not attempt to breathe new life into embattled religions or prop up politicians as mythical heroes; instead he painted mythological presentations of the gods of the nineteenth century: Failure, Doubt and Frustration. In great measure, it was the angst, the dissatisfaction and desperation of the nineteenth century, that powered its rampant and wondrous mythmaking; so Warrs created icons to the driving force of his restless time. Perhaps surprisingly, these icons of endless struggle are simultaneously perfect emblems of vitality and life.

For example, Orpheus and Eurydice (1872; Aberdeen Art Gallery, Aberdeen, figure 6) conveys a strong sense of energy and animation,
Figure 4. Caspar David Friedrich, Abtei im Eichwald entstanden, 1809-10. Courtesy of Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie, Berlin (West), Photograph by Jörg P. Anders.

Figure 5. J. M. W. Turner, The Sun of Venice Going to Sea, 1843. Courtesy of The Tate Gallery.
Figure 6. George Frederic Watts, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, 1872. Courtesy Aberdeen City Arts Department, Art Gallery and Museums.
which, rather than simply depicting the despair of Orpheus as Eurydice dies in his arms, treats Orpheus as explosively charged with life. The twist of his torso, the spring of his legs, the lunge of his head and shoulders, and the power with which this nude Orpheus supports the lifeless body of Eurydice makes this a monument to physical aspiration. This painting reflects Watts’s belief in the virtue of action itself. His maxim that “there is no law more distinctly divine than that which says, ‘Onwards!’” leaves; his motto “The Utmost for the Highest”; and his statement that “Religion is action” all demonstrate his obsession with striving. In The Victorian Frame of Mind, Walter Houghton points out that many other Victorians considered striving or aspiration of great importance: “Aspiration with all its fine sense of intensity and greatness thus became an end in itself. . . .” Like many of these Victorians, Watts believed that aspiration need not lead to success. As Rowland Alston wrote, Watts believed Robert Browning’s tenet that “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp.” In 1900 Watts wrote, “Failure is present in all highest endeavours. . . .” On August 26, 1880 he stated that “It is not for mortals to command success, all we can do is try to deserve it. . . .” In writing of the shortcomings of his own work he held that “its aspirations shall at least save it from meanness,” and he hoped his paintings would “secure success when they fail.” For Watts the trying was all and failure was inevitable. Iconographically, Orpheus and Eurydice embodies these beliefs with great visual intensity in all five versions painted from 1872 to 1903.

Watts’s most famous painting, Hope (1886; Tate Gallery, London, figure 7), reflects his mature iconography, for it dramatically treats suffering and action as moral virtues. Hope is a Greek mythical figure of Watts’s creation. Hunched and blindfolded, Hope sits alone on a globe as she plays one unbroken string of a lyre in an inhospitable, indefinite cosmic wasteland of murky haze. The figure’s back rises in awkward stages to a small concavity, to a lump at the shoulder, and then drops in two steps into an ungainly neck that extends horizontally from her upright torso. Watts further brutalizes the body of this figure by turning her right arm and hand into the bottom half of the parallelogram that reflects the shape of the lyre. These distortions produce a sense of strain and intense concentration in a scene of enveloping adversity.

The sense of angst conveyed through this posture seems oddly out of place in a work entitled Hope. Nonetheless, for Watts and for many who purchased reproductions of this painting, Hope was an antidote to hopelessness, an answer to despair and a call to action. In the New Gallery Catalogue of 1897 Watts wrote, "‘Hope’ strives to get all the music possible out of the last remaining string.” Striving, rather than despair, is the key to Watts’s interpretation of the painting; but striving does not imply
Figure 7. George Frederic Watts, Hope, 1886. Courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York.
achieving. At the time of the New Gallery Exhibition, Mary Watts recorded that her husband “found people confused Hope with expectation and said the difference was that expectation was definite and hope indefinite, ‘I was [sic] made Hope blind so expecting nothing.’” Watts’s message was that failure could be redeemed by striving. *Hope* was meant to inspire action in the face of despair.

Most critics, and most of those who purchased prints of the painting, did find *Hope* inspirational. For G. K. Chesterton, the image promoted a wide range of positive associations: “though Watts calls his tremendous reality *Hope*, we may call it many other things. Call it faith, call it vitality, call it will to live, call it religion of tomorrow morning, call it the immortality of man, call it self-love and vanity; it is a thing that explains why man survives all things and why there is no such thing as a pessimist.” The public bought reproductions of this painting in great numbers and treated the work as a household icon. According to Allen Staley, “*Hope* achieved widespread popularity as an inspirational image perhaps only rivaled by *The Angelus* and *The Light of the World*.” This myth of Watts’s creation was a myth Victorians could believe.

Watts attempted to counter the often paralyzing, even fatal, cynicism of his day. He hoped his promotion of the value of suffering could give meaning to those who suffer and who fail the most completely. Watts intended to redeem the lives of failed romantics, to set society after the highest goals, and to cure his own pessimism, a pessimism demonstrated in this excerpt from his attempt at verse:

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His Earth worn nature draws him ever down
The Sum of knowledge, the most soaring thought
A mind laborious, can acquire, serves but
To teach him one pride crushing truth,
His whole existence may be a lie!
How can he sustain a shock so rude?
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Oh Godlike reptile, insect wondrous, seek not to know
Or rather seek to know, such is your doom, seek
But never find, look in your pride ridiculous
But wondrous in attributes divine, of mind and thought
Go on the way ye have no power to leave
Bound round with chains, unseen through vanity
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Watts saw man as a proud, ridiculous insect who blindly lives a lie, but rather than becoming a complete cynic, he drew from his belief in the universal failure of all human endeavors a love for the struggle.
Figure 8. George Frederic Watts, *Sun, Earth and Her Dead Daughter the Moon*, 1899-1902. Courtesy Watts Gallery, Compton.
Another painting by Watts offering a powerful invented myth is Sun, Earth and Her Dead Daughter the Moon (1899-1902; Watts Gallery, Compton, figure 8). As the title indicates, the composition includes three figures. At the bottom a nude, dead, vaguely-defined and sexless image slumps into a mass of dark draperies; above this figure rises a nude female who sensually arches her back and projects her breasts forward; and towering above and projecting a golden glow is a muscular male who seems to be firing an arrow upwards. This composition creates a dramatic diagonal upward movement as it ascends from death and decay to sensuality and then to thundering physical action. Fragmented color, dissolved forms, and shimmering haze give this painting a sense of mystery. As in works by Odilon Redon, mystery conveyed through fragmented color and obscured form brings the viewer’s imagination into play. For Watts, however, imaginative involvement was not enough; he was determined to stimulate his audience to action. He designed his paintings to counter both paralysis and withdrawal from the world.

His canvas, Evolution (1900-03; Watts Gallery; Compton, figure 9), stimulates as it disturbs. Evolution is virtually a monument to ugliness. A huge, completely nude female figure appears before the viewer as an impossible collection of misshapen body parts. A group of writhing babies, who tend more toward maggots than Victorian cherubs, encircles her. Painted with an expressionistic smearing of paint, the scene violates all sense of perfection or harmony in color, texture or form. The woman depicted here is the mother of humanity, the bottomless pit of imperfection, the driving force for evolutionary change and an embodiment of the essence of progress. For Watts, evolutionary change signifies progress and progress by definition results from the imperfect.

Watts was no typical mythmaker. His art offered an unusual kind of transcendence. He did not carve out his own brand of truth; rather he embraced a different god, failure. Watts fashioned this grim common denominator of all human endeavors into an object of celebration. In his paintings we bathe in ignorance, inadequacy and suffering. Watts’s art renders a profoundly optimistic expression of homage to the frustrations of the human condition. But, more significantly, his embrace of failure and the unknown marks a decisive movement away from the nineteenth century’s paralyzing obsession with the validity of its myths. Based upon the unifying principle of uncertainty, Watts’s mythological paintings move us forward.

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Figure 9. George Frederic Watts, Evolution, 1900-1903. Courtesy of Watts Gallery, Compton.
NOTES


2 Sources for this interpretation of Caspar David Friedrich are Morse Peckham, Beyond the Tragic Vision (New York; George Braziller, 1962) 129-36, lectures of Kenneth Bendiner at Boston University in 1984, and conversations with Morse Peckham in 1980.


Fair shines the moon, and soft the zephyrs blow,
Venetia's fisher spreads his painted sail so gay,
Nor heeds the demon that in grim repose
Expects his evening prey.

Fallacies of Hope, MS


6 Mary Seton Watts, 1891 Diary, ms, M. S. Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton, 28 June 1891: “Beautify your principles as much as you like—as long as you remember that Religion is action, not fancy.”

7 Walter Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) 294. Aspiration as an end in itself was certainly not a uniquely Victorian phenomenon but was derived from German sources such as Goethe, in works such as Faust Part II.


11 Chapman 61.


13 G. K. Chesterton argues that the initial impression the painting gives suggests the title Despair in G. F. Watts (1904; London: Duckworth, 1975) 47.

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1 Mary Seton Watts, From Diaries 1896-1904, ms, M. S. Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton, 16 November 1897.

2 Chesterton 49.


5 George Frederic Watts, green and brown sketchbook, 4 1/2” x 5”, G. F. Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton.