Deconstruction or Reconstruction?
The Victorian Paintings of George Frederic Watts
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George Frederic Watts was a Victorian romantic who ridiculed the narrow constraints of dominant ideologies and embraced the liberation that comes from subversion. In many ways Watts was a Victorian deconstructionist, but he is known today, by those who might know him, as anything but that.\(^1\) Watts’s paintings negate a series of Victorian assumptions about religion, law, heroism, dogma and women. His paintings often participate in the very kind of deconstructionist program for intervention promoted by Griselda Pollock: “negating the knowledges and ideologies which are dominant and have become normalized as the common sensess about art and artists.”\(^2\)

Let us investigate ways that Watts’s paintings and words are deconstructionist, and consider how one so devoted to a position that today could be considered deconstructionist, and so wholeheartedly devoted to the toleration and respect for the other, could find himself appropriately labeled as an artist who actively supported imperialism. With Watts, we see how deeply embedded within the fabric of deconstruction is the alarming presence of reconstruction, the alarming presence of a narrow political agenda. We also can begin to examine an even more disturbing possibility. Could it be that we share in his failure, that there is no deconstruction without reconstruction, that attacking old political hierarchies simply creates new political hierarchies? With Watts we can begin to examine not only the myth of transcendence he offered, but the myth of transcendence offered by the optimistic advocates of today’s deconstructive theories.

Unlike most socially concerned painters of the Victorian era, Watts mostly subverted clearly defined movements and ideologies. His reluctance to serve dogmas and patriotism forced him to turn away from the frescoes of his early career. Because few patrons wanted wall paintings and because those who did wanted only wall paintings reflective of their own narrow beliefs, he turned instead to easel paintings and museums as vehicles to promote his ideas. Watts once said, “The two inventions most disastrous to man are theology and metaphysics.”\(^3\) He believed that clearly defined religions or ideologies could not explain the complexity of the world and that the failure to recognize the limitations of theology and metaphysics could have disastrous consequences. Of his own day he wrote, “it is an age of terrible wrong the more terrible because of the greater sense of right.”\(^4\) Watts set his art against self-righteousness and against enthusiastically held truths. For Watts, truth could never be within human reach. According to David Loshak, Watts’s concept of Truth was “summed up in one word: the ‘Unknowable.’”\(^5\) Rejecting self-righteous ideologies, Watts never gave unqualified support for narrowly defined movements.

Watts’s religious beliefs were anti-theological just as his philosophical beliefs were anti-metaphysical. He often remarked upon the appalling consequences of following narrowly defined theologies, particularly those of his own country. Watts said that it was “left to Christianity to institute the most awful tortures the world has ever seen.”\(^6\) Of England’s mix of politics and religion, Watts wrote of the “Idiotic and culpable indifference to Irish opinions and necessities which have resulted in the development of the worst qualities of [England’s] National character.”\(^7\) These may appear to be the words of a Catholic or at least a Tractarian, but Watts made it plain that he was neither. He thought that by extolling the infinite complexity of the world, and by proclaiming the lamentable failures to explain it, he could help to eradicate the power of oppressive ideologies in all their forms.\(^8\)


2. Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 183. This proposition might seem more than a bit absurd in light of the work of art historians such as Rosalind Krauss, who have directed the full force of deconstructionism against today’s cult of nineteenth-century art (The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, Cambridge, Mass., 1985). She deconstructs the myth of the avant-garde, the myth of originality, the myth of transcendence and the myth of the artist as genius. She makes it clear that deconstructionism renders any ideology impotent by exposing its class sources and its arbitrary claims to truth. She claims that deconstructionism, that great antidote to arrogance, holds no truths to be self-evident.

3. Mary Seton Watts, From Diaries 1886-1895, ms, M. S. Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton. This entry for the date of July 13, 1890 is a quotation from G. F. Watts of a type frequently repeated in the Watts Gallery extracts from Mary Watts’s diaries.


Watts's promotion of the "other" did not stem from a belief in the truths of the "other," but rather from his belief in the failure of everything human. He wrote the following in verse form:

- His Earth worn nature draws him ever down
- The Sum of knowledge, the most soaring thought
- And 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?

... 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.9

Watts saw mankind as a proud species of self-deceiving liars in desperate need of deconstruction. For Watts, knowing that all men are liars makes pride and the murderous defense of our own lies ridiculous. For Watts, deconstruction breeds sympathy for the other. He wrote:

- Reflect & own thyself the thing thou art,
- And cease at least the other to pursue
- With maliceless cruelty & hatred.10

Watts's deconstructive spirit pervaded his conversations and his paintings. Conceived in the late 1840s, Watts's fresco cycle, "House of Life," would have been a monumental homage to cultural diversity. This program was to include the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, Rome, the mythologies of India and Africa, with sections devoted to Mahomet and to the Popes with the "Founding of the Christian era treated simply as a matter of history setting up the cross."11 Not surprisingly, Watts was unable to obtain a commission for this history of civilization because it did not serve to flatter any prospective patrons. He did produce parts of it in easel paintings, such as Time and Oblivion (1849). Within this scheme Time and Oblivion are the destroyers of Greece, Rome, and the medieval era, and they will be the destroyers of Watts's era. Time and Oblivion allow for the birth of unexpected new civilizations by destroying what exists in the present.

Between 1852 and 1859, Watts created a peculiar fresco painting at P. C. Hardwicke's Lincoln's Inn. In Justice: A Hecatomb of the Lawgivers (fig. 1), Watts portrayed in the first row Edward I, Attila, Justinian and others and in the second row the ancient lawgivers Zoroaster, Moses, Solon, Confucius and others. At the top, Truth, Mercy and Justice are indistinctly rendered, partially obscured and dwarfed by an expanse of open space around them. Unlike Raphael's School of Athens which was his obvious source, here the focal point was indistinct, distant and uncommanding. This composition made explicit the inaccessibility of justice in the abstract while making justice by sword appear quite palpable. Watts presented the lawgivers as responsible for the foundations of thousands of years of culture. His hero-worship was akin to that of Thomas Carlyle and Friedrich Nietzsche, but it should be remembered that it was born of a strong sense of relativism, and not fanaticism. For Watts, to worship all heroes was to worship no one hero too much. These ideas were presented in a willfully fragmented composition. Promoting the diversities of world cultures over the authority of any one culture was at the heart of the iconography of this painting.

The Art Journal of 1860 was sensitive to Watts's point when it wrote of The Laugivers that "its greatness is not accumulative but distributive: it is an assemblage of splendid individualities."12 A 1904 biographer did not see this as a strength, stating, "the authority of Moses among the lawgivers is not supreme as the dual authority of Plato and Aristotle, and the comparative diffusion of the intellectual accent, consequent on this want of a comprehensive centre, necessarily weakens the composition."13

Despite its hints at cultural relativism, this fresco retained the rather offensive odor of cultural elitism. The Ubermenssch, however relativized, is still a narrow and oppressive ideal. By 1866 Watts imagined a very different monument to heroes.14 He proposed a monument to everyday heroes who gave their lives in acts of rescue. In 1887 he wrote a letter to the Times seeking financial support and, despite opposition within the House of Lords, in 1900 Watts erected this monument to everyday heroes in Postman's Park in London (figs. 2 and 3).15 When in 1980-81 Susan Hiller appropriated and reconstructed this monument in the World Financial Center in New York, in part to restate Watts's subversion of the Ubermensch and in

10. Ibid.
14. A copy of a letter from G. F. Watts to Charles Rickards, dated August 7, 1866, is among the Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton; "I am sometimes tempted in my impatience to try if I cannot get subscriptions and carry out a project I have only had which is, to erect a great statue to Unknown Worth." See also H. Duggall, "Postman's Park & its Memorial," (Published by the author, 1907).
15. Watts's letter, "To the Editor of the Times," was published September 5, 1887. Mary Seton Watts, 1898 Diary, no. M. 5. Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton, 29 October 1898: "Andrew brought a long letter from Lord Heath...opposing violently Signors [Watts's] little sheltering nook, where his plaques to Heroes are proposed to be inserted—Andrew has to go to London about it—it seems quite ridiculous that such a harmless proposal should be met with a storm of opposition."

Fig. 2 George Frederic Watts, Postman's Park, London, 1900 (Photo: Arthur Beament, courtesy of The Watts Gallery, Compton, Guildford, Surrey).

Fig. 3 George Frederic Watts, Postman's Park, London, 1900 (Photo: Arthur Beament, courtesy of The Watts Gallery, Compton, Guildford, Surrey).
part to deconstruct the myth of the originality of deconstructionism, *Art in America* of April 1991 described Hiller’s works in terms that might apply to its appropriated source:

*Monument* alluded to the most *public* to the point of complete obscurity, lives which became public and exemplary only through death. In a cool and poignant way *Monument* posed a whole mass of questions about history, values, life/death and representation.

Watts’s monument offered such a polyphony of heroes that he subverted Carlyle’s notion of a hero of the age and thereby undermined the latter’s assumptions about history and representation.

Watts directly attacked militaristic religious fanaticism in *Faith* of 1890-1896 (fig. 4). E. T. Cook aptly explained it as “A Symbolic figure, novel in conception and modern in sentiment breathing the toleration of a Faith which no longer trusts the power of the sword, and has learnt to recognize the good in the creeds of others.” This painting followed the same logic that produced the concept of the “House of Life” in which Christianity simply took its place among a host of world theologies. In *Faith* Watts made a virtue of anguish and conveyed it through distortion. Faith’s eye twisted strangely and unattractively in its socket and stared directly at the viewer even as her head was in virtual profile. For Watts, mystery, confusion and wonder had everything to do with religious toleration. His belief in the fundamental mystery of the world is the most important reason for his rejection of any one creed. He wrote, “The one thing which is more than ever clearly perceived is the density of the veil that covers the mystery of our being, at all times impenetrable, and to be impenetrable, in spite of which conviction we ever passionately yearn to pierce it.” By presenting images of self-doubt and mystery, Watts hoped to woo his viewers away from fanaticism, dogmatism and certainty. It should be understood that, in part, his intense dislike of theological dogma drove him to produce images such as *Faith* that would breed self-doubt by being impenetrable, disorienting, unattractive and unsettling.

Watts attacked unquestioned governmental authority in *The Daughter of Herodias* (1870-1880). Salome is dangerous, not because of her dance, but because she is the daughter of Herodias, step-daughter of Herod, and possessor of the royal signet. This rather traditional Catholic image was painted by a secular agnostic not to promote the Catholic Church, the Christian religion, Christian martyrs or the state, but rather to subvert the idea of murder without guilt, which is the foundation of state execution. Mary Watts wrote, “The action of Salome in holding up the ring of Herod indicates the responsibility for the death of John the Baptist is not hers but the

King's." 19 The catalogue of Watts's own public gallery stated that Salome's "conscience tells her she is guilty, but she holds up the royal signet as a defense against her better self, and against the criticism of the world." 20 Watts turned an image traditionally treated in terms of female seduction into an attack on smug governmental murder. 21

Beginning about 1880, Watts directly attacked patriarchal representations of women. His Godiva of 1880-1890 (fig. 5) subverted those representations of women both inside and outside the academy that depended upon the beauty myth and the controlling male gaze. Mary Watts wrote that it was "Painted as a protest against the many studies of the nude model exhibited under this title." 22 Watts represented Godiva, not as an available and titillating object, but as a woman tortured by those who visually rape her as they hold her within their line of sight. Her body was twisted, bent down, and lacerated by the power of the gaze and nothing of beauty was left to covet in the crusty and smeared flesh that Watts represented. Watts subverted the objectifying male gaze that he used so often in paintings such as the Peacock Fan (1862), by here showing the gaze as a brutal and dehumanizing force. 23 The gaze consumed Godiva, and in doing so the gaze itself was consumed. The oppressive ideology of the gaze was stripped bare, and any hint of voyeuristic eroticism expunged. Watts, an artist with a long history of titillating paintings, used the woman as other to subvert himself. 24

In She Shall be Called Woman of 1892 (fig. 6) Watts presented woman, not as the eternal feminine, not as the sexual energy driving male ideology, not as an inert object of male ideology, but as a creative source of ideology. For Watts, Eve was the "mind of modern times." 25 She was woman free of male domination and she embodied Watts's belief that "The hope of the future lies in the fact that woman is now beginning to take her place." For Watts, this Eve represented the radical and modern belief that "thought's power is a material existence." 26 He showed the material world literally emanating from her. She created the world just as each of us creates the world. Much as Carlyle wrote in 1840, "The world of Nature, for everyman, is the Phantasy of himself, the world is the multiplex 'Image of his own Dream.'" 27 Remarkably, Watts invited women to join men, if not to lead men, in creating a more modern fantasy of the world.

21. Watts's connection with the very active anti-capital punishment movement in Victorian England still needs to be more firmly established and, in that context, the meaning of this largely unknown, intriguing painting still deserves a more careful investigation.
22. Mary Seton Watts, Catalogue of Paintings, p. 64.
25. Mary Seton Watts, 1891 Diary, ms, M. S. Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton, 3 July 1891.
26. Mary Seton Watts, 1893 Diary, ms, M. S. Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton, 14 April 1893.
which one has forgotten that this is what they are." Deconstructionism is not bias free. For Watts, as for Griselda Pollock, the great source of value in a world of artificially constructed value is an on-going process of subversion.

In a profoundly racist and imperialist essay published late in his career entitled "Our Race as Pioneers," Watts took the side of British imperialism in the Boer War, believing that the Boers stood in the way of moral progress in South Africa. Advocacy of subversion when combined with a belief in historical progress can make a genocidal mix, for it is all too easy to deconstruct our enemies. Watts treated the other like cannon-fodder as he asked for the destruction of those parts of the present that belonged in the past, and in doing so he fell prey to self-righteousness.

Although Watts can be seen as a deconstructionist acting on his convictions, we see all too painfully that deconstruction is reconstruction. In 1902 Watts agreed that his sculpture Physical Energy should be sent to Cape Town, South Africa, to serve as a monument to Cecil Rhodes and to British imperialism as agents of moral progress. Today, as the ethnic and cultural cleansing of moral superiority collides with the economic and cultural crushing of "laissez-faire" capitalism, a question reverberates from Victorian Britain to Post-Modern America and from Los Angeles to Sarajevo. Must we agree with followers of Nietzsche who would point to Sarajevo, Rostock, Baghdad and Los Angeles as they argue that our truths are illusions that are far too powerful for pluralism to be possible, or can we possibly imagine a better model? Armed with the truth of deconstructive method is there reason to think that we are near a solution? It might be worth our trouble to ponder Watts's failures before we treat him as our other.

There is little doubt that Watts's deconstructionism failed, in great measure, because he thought it gave him license to deconstruct the other, forgetting that he could as easily deconstruct himself. And yet are not many of us, who believe we have moved beyond him, simply repeating his mistake, as we make Watts our other? As Watts would have it, the answer to this question will be controlled by those who write tomorrow's texts.

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29. This, in part, is why Pollock subverts even Linda Nochlin. In Pollock's eyes, Nochlin is a promoter of fixed values. She is narrow, fixed, regressive, oppressive and old-fashioned when she demands that women accept male values. Nochlin's great flaw is that she sees women as "the disadvantaged other whose freedom lies in becoming like man" (Vision and Difference, p. 35). She does not deconstruct male ideology, she appropriates it. In the name of progress through subversion, Pollock blasts Nochlin. Deconstructionism, attacking from its self-admitted void of truths, finds leverage to attack Nochlin, one of the most powerful constructive critics in art history and feminist studies.