Contrasting G. F. Watts and Frederic Leighton in the 1860's and early 1870's is a challenge. Both painted the classical nude, both promoted the importance of murals, and both lauded the importance of beauty in public art. Those with a keen eye will see in Leighton a finer polish perhaps, slightly greater interest in rhyming compositional elements, and frequently a cooler, more dead-pan approach to his subjects. Even such distinctions do not work perfectly well, for Leighton could be emotionally intense as in his Helios and Rhodis (c.1869, Tate Britain), or heavily invested in subject matter as in the cloying misogyny in his Orpheus and Eurydice (c.1864, Leighton House Museum). 1 Though the subtle viewer can find distinctions, Watts and Leighton in those years were more alike than different. Together they helped to change the Royal Academy and make the monumental nude a norm. 2 On the surface, it makes perfect sense to see them as a Royal Academy pair. As true as this model might be in some of its general outlines, it does not begin to define the vision of G. F. Watts. 3

From his earliest years Watts held great disdain for the Royal Academy and let his outspoken views be widely circulated. 4 He spent thirty years of his exhibition career outside of the Royal Academy only to be bullied in by Leighton in 1867. Once on the inside his disdain grew stronger, and not just for the Academy itself, Watts became more and more vexed with Leighton’s pronouncements and his art. His academic perfection disgusted Watts, Leighton’s superficial interest in style repelled him, and Leighton’s contempt for women’s rights disappointed him deeply. 5 As President of the Royal Academy, Leighton stood for the very ideals that Watts attempted to overthrow. When we consider Watts’s Evolution (No. 107) we see that his mature art shared almost nothing with Leighton. Here Watts lets fly all his objections with Leighton and all his criticisms of the Royal Academy on principles of style, content, and vision. This painting stands in starkest contrast to the cool aesthetic perfection of Leighton’s paintings and presents instead a startling essay in imperfection as the foundation for all progress, revolution, and evolution. 6 Royal Academy displays of competence and ‘perfection’ never satisfied Watts. 7 For Watts, Leighton’s cult of artistic perfection was anathema, and though Leighton was a dear friend, Watts’s contempt for Leighton’s art inspired his greatest achievements. It took Watts many years to grow beyond the classical ideals that he and Leighton once appeared to champion in unison, but then Watts painted for many, many years.

Watts’s art was a socially engaged art and Leighton’s art was an art of withdrawal into the narcotic power of beauty. The difference was very much one of vision. Leighton pretended that achieving formal perfection could substitute for a deceased social rôle for art. Watts saw through Leighton’s argument though. He saw it as painting for the status quo, as giving into entropy, and putting art and politics to bed at a time when the Victorian world needed to be shaken into growth and life. Watts’s art consistently urges political and moral growth, while Leighton’s art attempts to find satisfaction in beauty.

For Watts, politics and art went absolutely hand in hand, and he was appalled that the Royal Academy had done so much to sever the two. It should come as no surprise to learn that Watts painted his The Return of Godiva (No. 69) as a protest against the titillating, sexist paintings of his brother artists, 8 or that Watts painted the women’s suffrage leader, Josephine Butler (1895, National Portrait Gallery), for the National Portrait Gallery, or that he painted She Shall Be Called Woman (1892, Tate Britain) as an embodiment of the newly awakened women’s rights movement. 9 Leighton, who pretended to paint sleeping women as art for art’s sake, also made it his business to take an anti-women’s suffrage petition to Mrs. Watts. 10 He should have known better, but a difference of opinion never kept Leighton away from Watts’s door.

Differences of opinion between Watts and Leighton ran deep, and understanding those differences helps us to understand why their mature art is so dramatically different. Standing before the students of the Royal Academy Leighton proclaimed that escapism should be the mission of art ‘Art which has borne up, and daily bears up, in oblivious ecstasy so many weary souls, which has lulled and cheated if only for a moment so many aching hearts.” 11 For Leighton, escapism through beauty was a noble ideal, but he went much further in defining the proper role of art: “What ethical proposition can it [art] convey? What teaching or exhortation is in its voice? None, absolutely none . . . Now the language of Art is not the appointed vehicle of ethic truths.” 12 When Leighton said these words he damned the vision of Watts and dismissed Watts’s social and political art as amounting to absolutely nothing.

Overleaf:
Evolution, c.1900-03
(No. 107)
For Leighton, art should say nothing and reform nothing. The fact that Leighton could never quite meet his lofty ideal should not surprise us, but neither should we be surprised that Watts responded. He rebutted these attacks in print within months. Watts complained that ‘An Academy Exhibition room is no place for a grave deliberate work of art ... We are elated by champagne and light buzz of talk ... We must have something light, epigrammatic, not too long, or we shall be bored to death ... Modern public exhibitions are most unfavorable, it may be said disastrous, to the best interests of art – good perhaps for industry, but injurious to art as art.’ Watts was not vague in his definition of ‘art as art’, and how far Leighton missed the mark. For Watts art as art ‘rests on much wider and more solid foundations than mere amusement for moments of leisure.’ Watts charged that the Royal Academy exhibition produced art ‘treated as a
plaything, nothing more. While this is the case, artists will employ themselves in making toys, and the annual exhibition will be cared for by the nation pretty much as a Christmas tree is, and not so important an institution by half as the Maypole formerly was. To think that Watts deferred to Leighton’s notion that artists could paint beauty is to miss Watts’s vision entirely. He wrote: ‘Beauty and Truth I do not forget, but they in their perfection, are too distant and too much obscured to be profanely thought of even.’ For Watts, pretending that an artist can achieve beauty was absurd. It was as absurd as equating great social art with toys and Christmas tree ornaments. To pretend to paint beauty is to paper over human failures, but not simply aesthetic failures. For Watts, to claim to paint ‘beauty’ is to lull the ‘weary soul’ and cheat reform. Watts put his social convictions into paint through works such as *The Irish Famine* (1849–50, WG), *Under a Dry Aroch* (1849–50, WG), *Mamanou* (1884–85, Tate Britain), *Industry and Greed* (1892–1901, WG), and through scores of other works that were designed to shake England out of its capitalist and materialist complacency. For Watts, Leighton’s ‘beautiful’ paintings were the problem, not the solution. Watts did what he could within the Royal Academy but exhibited far more heavily at the Grosvenor Gallery, at the New Gallery, and in countless regional exhibitions where he could exhibit his art in thought provoking clusters.

To Watts’s dismay, Leighton’s art of social withdrawal was winning the day, both inside and outside of the academy. Beauty in dreamland consumed the field of art from Leighton, to Albert Moore, to Edward Burne-Jones, to a slew of minor artists who used sleep as the perfect metaphor for their retreat into the numbing power of beauty. In word and in paint Leighton cast aside Watts’s art of direct social engagement. For Leighton the narcotic power of beauty was his greatest moral gift to a world in need of aesthetic comfort, for Watts that gift was a poisonous drug that epitomized the capitalist disease of his age. In his *Wife of Pluto* (No. 68) Watts takes Leighton and his
brother artists to task. He refuses to veil the sexual content of this female nude, as Leighton so frequently had. But this is no charming dreamland. Instead he depicts the wife of Pluto as ill. Her erotic appeal vanishes into naivete as Watts uses luxurious, sensuous and sensual imagery to create an image of despair. This is a pointed attack on Leighton’s ideal land of beautiful dreams. Watts explained the meaning of the painting in a letter to the painting’s buyer, ‘in the Wife of Pluto I wish to suggest the disease of wealth’.18 Watts was deeply opposed to the dreamland ideal as his wife, Mary Seton Watts, records; ‘Life he [Watts] said has something more than a dream for its object. There is work wh. is what we have to live for – not sitting amongst flowers by a stream.’19 For Watts, Leighton’s escape into beauty was sickening.

Just as postmodernism dismisses Clement Greenberg for leading so many people to believe that art can exist free of social conscience, Watts attacks Leighton’s supposedly amoral, beautiful images of slumbering women and lolling men. If Leighton wants England to fall asleep, Watts is ready to point out just how unsatisfying and cruel that sleep is. Mammon (No. 69) is Watts’s most direct attack on capitalist greed, and it undermines Leighton’s cult of beauty and leisure. Below Mammon are his victims, lying unconscious at his feet. These crumpled and twisted figures echo Leighton’s sleeping figures in Gwynn and Iphigenia (No. 105) and Summer Moon (1872, private collection, India), but Watts treats them as victims of luxury, certainly not as lofty ideals. He emphasizes their imperfection and achieves a stylistic effect that is unsettling. While Leighton would lull us into complacency, Watts attempts to jar us into motion.

For those who still believed that Leighton’s ideal was indeed an ideal, Watts painted his troubling Peace and Goodwill (No. 65). Speaking of this painting he noted: ‘the fact that the spirit of work was vanishing from among us’ and that ‘Man is not a nocturnal animal.’20 In word and in paint Watts attacked the sleeping beauties that lined the walls of the Royal Academy. Leighton’s Flaming June (c. 1895, Museo de Arte de Ponce) is a sumptuous and flawless expression of his dream ideal and The Slumber of the Ages (No. 104) is a pointed perversion of that ideal. Here sleep becomes insomnia; sensuousness collapses into decay, flowing lines break, and precision dissolves into mystery. On the lap of Watts’s sleeping mother is an alert child looking out on a strange landscape. Watts achieves this reversal not only by challenging the ideal of inaction, but by attacking Leighton’s conventions for the perfected use of line, colour and brushstroke; he condemns Leighton’s expressions of beauty.

Watts devoted his last two decades to expressing the absurdity of objectifying perfection. For Watts, Leighton’s obsession with perfection was denial of life itself, with its inherent moral and political tensions. For Watts, revealing those tensions was part of his desperate hope for meaningful political change. When Watts saw ‘perfection’ in Leighton, he saw an artist who had forgotten to struggle and who had sold England out. M. H. Spielmann, in an unpublished and undated note, quotes Watts as saying that ‘Leighton’s perfection was too great – like himself. His successful search for beauty produced results that were necessarily apart from humanity.’21 Mary Watts writes on 2 February 1897 that Watts believed that Leighton’s ‘very accomplishments, the power of dexterous mastery was a limitation to him he ceased to seek & strive & there were no birth pangs before the picture sprang full grown & ready dressed into the world’.

It is true that Watts’s amorphous style is partially a consequence of his symbolist tendencies, and it is true his interest in the cultural or spiritual nature of existence shaped his style; but we miss a fundamental grounding for Watts’s style if we fail to notice the profound importance that Watts placed on imperfection itself. Mary Watts writes the following entry on 3 May 1893; in which Watts rails against Leighton’s low ideals: ‘He [Leighton] takes me[Watts]
round the Academy – “There look at that, they say the Academy does not teach- is not that good work” as far as it goes it is good – I only regret it is so, for it bringing sumptuous and flawless expression of his dream ideal so many young people up to paint, & it can never make artists of them – [sic] I feel so angry with dear Leighton for not giving himself a chance.’ Watts could not reach Leighton, nor could he reach the disciples of aesthetic perfection like George Moore who castigated Watts’s female nudes, saying, ‘why should so beautiful a material as oil paint be transformed into a crummy substance like – I can think of nothing else but the rind of Stilton cheese’. When Watts painted Lady Godiva with breasts so broken and coarse, he was certainly not presenting the female nude as an aesthetic ideal. Watts was condemning Royal Academy artists for living in the past. For Watts, Leighton’s art had a didactic message: it stood for the status quo, and against Watts’s push for social change. What makes Watts remarkable is that he refused to conform within ‘such a dull and stupid institution’ as the Royal Academy. Leighton stood for stylistic stasis, while Watts made evolution his creed and his practice.

Notes
1. Smith notes the ‘rapturous embrace of the lovers,’ in Hellen and Rhodon; Alison Smith, ‘Nature Transformed: Leighton, the Nude and the Model’ in Barringer and Prettejohn 1999, p. 27. For Orpheus and Eurydice see Ormond and Ormond, Leighton sees the story as the destruction of an artist through the power of a woman,” Minneapolis, 1975, p. 40.
4. Watts hammered the Royal Academy in print in 1853 and again in Taylor, 1853, and in 1863 in statements before the Royal Academy itself. See MSW, 1912, III, pp. 80-146 for excerpts of Watts’s extensive criticisms.
5. MSW, 1912, II, pp. 145-46. Watts supported women’s suffrage ‘and believes that a feminine influence might have a very good effect on politics Lord Shaftesbury measures would have been carried far sooner had women had the votes.’ MSW, diary extracts, 24 May 1889.
7. Fry, 1905, p. 621, ‘it was certainly not incoherence that led Watts to finally adopt that rocky, dry, and crumpled quality which had given rise to the curious legend of his incompetence. Even in those later works, unsympathetic though their surface may be, he shows incomparable skill in using these dry rubbings and scumblings of pigment so as to produce colour which has mystery and infinity.’
8. MSW Cat. 64b, ‘painted as a protest against the many studies of the merely nude mode exhibited under this title.’
11. Leighton, 1896, p. 54.
12. ibid., p. 54-55.
14. ibid., p. 156.
15. ibid., p. 165-66.
16. Letter to Charles Newton from Watts, 1852 (WG).
17. See Bendiner, 1985, 4, (WG).
19. MSW, diary extracts (WG).
21. Mr. Watts has set himself the task of conveying to the spectator an impression of the cost to the woman herself which such an action as this must have been performed,’ Notes and News.’ Anon. [probably Emilia Strong, the future Mrs Patterson] The Academy October 31, 1874, p. 493.
22. Still, Watts condemned John Calcutt Horsley’s ‘excessive tenderness’ against the study of the nude. ‘My aim is now, and will be to the end, not so much to paint pictures which are delightful to the eye, but pictures which will go to the intelligence -... And in doing this I am forced to paint the nude. See this picture of “Mammon”. The creature crushes under one foot the undraped figure of the boy, and his heavy hand he lays coarsely and brutally upon the girl’s head.’ Spielmann, 1886, p. 15.
23. Mary Watts sums up her husband’s frustrations, ‘More & more one regrets that Signor should even nominally be connected with such a dull stupid institution,’ MSW, diary, 22 January 1891 (WG).