ABSTRACT

Journeying Toward the Beatific Vision:
The Uses and Abuses of Dante in *Robert Elsmere*

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In *Robert Elsmere*, Mrs. Humphry Ward addresses the Christological concerns of Victorian England. Robert's crisis of faith and resulting inability to maintain a belief in the divinity of Christ is juxtaposed against his wife's focus on the divinity, occasionally at the expense of his humanity. It is in the traditional orthodox teaching of the Incarnation that these two natures must meet in order for husband and wife to commune with each other and with God. While Mrs. Humphry Ward intends to debunk the superstitious elements of traditional Christianity and replace orthodoxy with a humanist version of the Gospel; however, in tying Robert to Dante and Catherine to Beatrice, she aligns her novel with Dante's poetic rendering of everyman's spiritual journey from ignorance to full knowledge of the Incarnate Christ. In doing so, Ward undermines her own goal, instead allowing the paradoxical union of divinity and humanity embodied in the doctrine of the Incarnation to drive the movement of her narrative, much as it drives Dante's *Divine Comedy*. By tracing Dantesque allusions throughout Ward's tale of spiritual struggle, we will see that it is the Incarnation, in all of its paradoxical and poetic beauty, which enables the salvation of both the heretic and the saint.

Journeying Toward the Beatific Vision:
The Uses and Abuses of Dante in *Robert Elsmere*

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of English

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Reading as the private confession of both an individual and of an age, *Robert Elsmere* has suspended in time a period which simultaneously seems remotely distant and yet strikingly relevant to our own. Declared by Tolstoy to be the greatest English novelist of her day, Mrs. Humphry Ward's ability to encapsulate a specific milieu while evoking eternal truths led to commercial and critical success. *Robert Elsmere* does, as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle claimed, "have the whole of Victorian civilization dissected and preserved.[1]" Her story of an ordinary man's struggle to reconcile the tension between faith and doubt spoke to a generation saturated with these difficulties, leading her contemporaries to assert "there are few literary personalities, if indeed there be any, that have made a deeper impression on the psychosis of our own times than that of Mary Augusta Arnold."[2]

Close friend and fellow author Henry James, said of Ward's first novel,

> No agitation on the platform or in the newspaper, no demand for a political revolution, ever achieved anything like the publicity or roused anything like the emotion of the earnest attempt of this quiet English lady to tell an interesting story, to present an imaginative case. *Robert Elsmere* in the course of a few weeks, put her name in the mouths of the immeasurable English reading multitude. The book was not merely an extraordinarily successful novel; it was, as reflected in contemporary conversation, a momentous public event.[3]

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[1]Tolstoy and Doyle qtd. in William S. Peterson, *Victorian Heretic: Mrs. Humphry Ward's Robert Elsmere* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1976) 2.

[2]J. Stewart Walters qtd. in Esther Marian Greenwell Smith, *Mrs. Humphry Ward* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 142-143.

[3]Henry James qtd. in Peterson, 159.

James is not overstating the case. Although practically unheard of now, in its day, *Robert Elsmere* was an unprecedented commercial success, both in England and later in America.[4] Its impact may have been due less to the story itself and more to the religious implications which stirred the already testy waters of the later Victorian period. Ward's first novel sparked controversy and, once word began to spread, elicited a belated firestorm of critical attention, most notably from W.E. Gladstone whose lengthy and impassioned review of the book is to some degree responsible for its sudden surge in readership. Ward's novel was rarely met with neutrality; readers across the religious spectrum found some aspect with which to either identify or take offence. William S. Peterson notes the novel's paradoxical impact,

> While High Churchmen and conservative Evangelicals fulminated against Elsmere's heresies, Agnostics complained that –as one American wrote- "it will revive interest in theology and retard the progress of rationalism." But however it was interpreted, *Robert Elsmere* was universally regarded as a Sign of the Times which would supply the careful reader with a clue to the present theological and intellectual state of England.[5]

Despite this lofty status, within a generation of its publication *Robert Elsmere's* critical esteem waned rapidly as Victorianism and all it stood for was rejected by its very product. The subsequent generation could no longer stomach the religious themes they deemed obsolete, nor the moralizing style they viewed as sentimental. Perhaps the two most common charges leveled against the book, are its problematic ending and its tendency toward polemical didacticism. Ward's often over-indulgent hero-worship of the

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[4]Peterson, 161. James was not the only American author impressed with Ward's narrative.Mark Twain claims his experience of reading *Robert Elsmere* "was exactly as though a singer of street ballads were to hear excellent music from a church organ.I didn't stop to ask whether the music was legitimate or necessary. I listened, and I liked what I heard.I am speaking of the grace and beauty of the style."

[5]Peterson, 160.

title character, as well as her complete confidence in the new and weakly defined religion he ushers in, certainly lend credence to the latter while the death-bed scene's refusal to answer lingering doubts as to the efficacy of the proposed world-view, as well as its ambiguity concerning Robert's spiritual state certainly justifies frustration. However, in spite of these accusations, Peterson claims the work is more than mere polemics because "in her best moments, [Ward] has left us a moving, vivid, human account of what it meant to go out into the wilderness of unbelief in the last century."[6] Peterson goes on to claim that Ward's "lifelong preoccupation with theological questions, seen from this perspective, reflects [her] desire to resolve, partly through the very act of writing, her own dialogue of the mind with itself."[7]

In this fluid schematic, Ward then creates not a religious pamphlet, but the history of a human relationship: specifically the relationship between husband and wife and its role in spiritual fulfillment.[8] A closer examination of this dialogic working out of the self reveals an unorthodox pattern on which to base a tale of the life of a heretic; beginning early and following through to the end of the novel, Ward connects her pilgrim to Dante whose fictionalized spiritual journey in no way denies Christ's divinity, but instead culminates in the beatific vision found only in the Incarnate Christ. The dynamic struggle between the humanism of Robert and the spirituality of Catherine mirrors the paradoxical union of divinity and humanity embodied in the doctrine of the Incarnation and it is this union that drives the movement of Ward's narrative, much as it drives Dante's *Divine Comedy*. By tracing Dantesque allusions throughout Ward's tale of

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[6]Peterson, 13.

[7]Peterson, 13.

[8]Cancelled passage from original MS; Ward qtd. in Peterson, 119.

spiritual struggle, we will see that it is the Incarnation, in all of its paradoxical and poetic beauty, which enables the salvation and transformation of both the heretic and the saint.

Superficially, the use of Dante is not at all out of step with Ward's Victorianism. The Italian poet was enjoying a popular resurgence in the period and Ward's contemporaries had set a literary precedent for his role as the standard everyman figure. Gladstone particularly championed the cause of Dante claiming that among the more than 20,000 books he had read, he found Dante to be one of the most profitable.[9] Biographer John Morley points out that Gladstone was not alone in his love for the Italian.

> He was in good company here, among the Victorian literati. Dante, largely through Coleridge's proselytism, was virtually rediscovered in the nineteenth century, and by their own testimony proved a source of inspiration to prominent figures in church and state of very different leanings. Macaulay's respect for Dante bordered on adulation, F.D. Maurice, R.W. Church and DG Rosetti felt the same. Tennyson – according to Michael Wheeler – derived his understanding of the nature of divine love, as expressed in *In Memoriam*, from his reading of Dante. F.W. Robertson was so moved by the *Inferno*, which he read in 1845, that he committed the whole of it to memory. [10]

In addition to these figures, Dante ranked third in Carlyle's list of heroes, after David and Mahomet and was among the Pre-Raphaelites revered list of "immortals.[11] Matthew Arnold himself wrote on the importance of Dante, especially in his relations with Beatrice, a theme that will prove essential to his niece's novel.[12] With such a literary precedent firmly established, artistically Dante proves a solid predecessor for Ward's pilgrim; however, the theological implications are more problematic. Mrs. Humphry

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[9]John Morley qtd. in David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997) 150.

[10]Arnold qtd. in Newsome, 150-151.

[11]Newsome, 157.Originally from Carlyle's lecture series, *On Heroes*.

[12]Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*: Third Series (Boston: The Ball Publishing Co., 1910).

Ward intends Robert to come to a new understanding, replacing traditional Christianity with her New Brotherhood, the practical equivalent of Unitarianism; however, in many ways, her use of Dante undermines this very argument as Dante's goal is not replaced, but affirmed. Modeling Robert after Dante, Ward's ambiguous ending is left with the possibility of a far more orthodox interpretation than she may have intended.

If we are to prove that Ward's use of Dante has unwittingly made the opposite case than she anticipated, we must examine Robert's pilgrimage in the context of the author's own contemporary milieu as well as the greater historical framework of the Church, including its representation by Dante. It is important to note the similarities between the tradition she rejects and the work she creates to refute it. This introductory chapter will provide that context, followed by an examination of the work itself as a story of spiritual pilgrimage in which human relationships provide guidance and drive toward the ultimate end.

Transition and Transformation

As she sat there, her Bible on her knee, her strained unseeing gaze resting on the garden and the seam a sort of hallucination took possession of her. It seemed to her that she saw the form of the Son of man passing over the misty slope in front of her, that the dim majestic figure turned and beckoned. In her half dream fell on her knees. "Master!" she cried in agony, "I cannot leave him! Call me not! My life is here. I have no heart –it beats in his."

And the figure passed on, the beckoning hand dropping at its side.

.....

Not that I saw more than a single face
as I was gazing into the loving glow,
for it is ever as it ever was,
But in my vision winning valor so,
that sole appearance as I changed by seeing
appeared to change and form itself anew.[13]

[13]Dante Alighieri, *Paradise* Canto XXXIII, ll. 109-114.

Ward's three volumes of marital hardship and bliss culminate in a concluding scene that leaves readers puzzled and, in many cases, unsatisfied.[14] In true Victorian Romance fashion, Ward ends her tale with a deathbed scene; however, the implications of Robert's death and final confession are far less clear than the traditional use of this convention. Isolated from the demands of the world, the couple prepares for their final separation, Robert weak and dying and Catherine praying fervently for divine intervention.

> As she sat there, her Bible on her knee, her strained unseeing gaze resting on the garden and the seam a sort of hallucination took possession of her. It seemed to her that she saw the form of the Son of man passing over the misty slope in front of her, that the dim majestic figure turned and beckoned. In her half dream fell on her knees. "Master!" she cried in agony, "I cannot leave him! Call me not! My life is here. I have no heart – it beats in his."
> And the figure passed on, the beckoning hand dropping at its side. She followed it with a sort of anguish, but it seemed to her as though mind and body were alike incapable of moving –that she would not if she could.
> Then suddenly a sound from behind startled her. She turned, her trance shaken off in an instant, and saw Robert sitting up in bed.
> For a moment, her lover, her husband, of the early days was before her –as she ran to him. But he did not see her.
> An ecstasy of joy was on his face; the whole man bent forward listening.
> *"The child's cry!-thank God! Oh! Meyrick –Catherine –thank God!"*
> And she knew that he stood again on the stairs at Murewell in that September night which gave them their first-born, and that he thanked God because her pain was over.
> An instant's strained looking, and, sinking back into her arms, he gave two or three gasping breaths, and died.[15]

Is this an inversion of the traditional last minute conversion, employed by authors throughout time to save the soul of their beloved protagonist just in time? Does Catherine deny the faith she has held so long to be united with Robert? Does she, as

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[14]W.E.Gladstone, "Robert Elsmere and the Battle of Belief," *The Nineteenth Century* vol. xxiii (January-June 1888): 766-788.

[15]Mrs. Humphry Ward, *Robert Elsmere* (London, 1888) 604.

Gladstone claims, submit to a "degrading compromise"?[16] How does Robert's vision of the birth of his child compare to Catherine's vision of Christ? In a century of criticism, these pressing questions have never been satisfactorily answered; however, a closer examination of Ward's tale, seen through the lens of Dante the author provides, may supply answers to this crucial scene and shed light on the novel as a whole.

When trying to gain a stronger handle on Ward's slippery ending, we should first ask the question: what is the spiritual pilgrim's intended end? Assuming, as it seems safe to do, she intends her protagonist to reach fulfillment, perhaps the key to the ending lies in determining what that fulfillment is, or should be. Throughout Christian Tradition, many doctrinal and practical aspects of the faith have altered in both substance and expression; however, the end goal of the Christian life, at its core, remains constant. For Augustine (himself a significant presence in the novel) that goal is described as the soul's final return to rest in God.[17] Aquinas, however, sums it up in words most relevant to Ward and her pursuits when he claims, the ultimate goal of the intellectual being is the vision of God in his essence.[18] It is this vision which has inspired two millennia of Christians to, as Paul first stated, "press on" toward a perfected knowledge of humanity's purpose.[19]

This journey toward the beatific vision is the drive and fulfillment of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Despite the unfortunate popular habit of readers remaining mired in the drama of *Inferno,* it is the final canto of *Paradiso* that justifies the confusion, misery, and suffering

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[16]Gladstone

[17]Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: New American Library, 1963).

[18]Aquinas qtd. in Esolen *Inferno,* p. 393.

[19]Philippians 3:12-14.

of the human existence as all things are made clear in Dante's final vision in which Christ appears as both man and God; the "end of all desires" is found in the Incarnation.[20] In his description of this revelation Dante provides an important key to understanding the Victorian predicament concerning orthodoxy's struggle to maintain the end goal of unity with a divine Christ. His awed bewilderment at the grandeur of the scene comes "Not that I saw more than a single face/as I was gazing into the living glow,/ for it is ever as it ever was,/But in my vision winning valor so,/that sole appearance as I changed by seeing/ appeared to change and form itself anew."[21]

Here we see that, even when appearing in different guises throughout time, the goal, the ultimate prize and purpose of human existence, remains constant and, as Dante suggests, the pilgrim is transformed to meet the goal, not vice versa.

This idea of change cannot be underestimated when surveying Christian history and the history of the Church. Orthodoxy has not been stagnant, but has been built up from its inception as a bulwark protecting the faith from liberal extremism. Putting words to the reality of Christ's dual nature has been the task of orthodoxy from the earliest days of the church. Church fathers worked tirelessly to guard against such heresies as Docetism, Arianism, and Gnosticism that threatened this central orthodox doctrine. The Christian church, it could be argued, was built around defining and protecting the perceived goal of life's spiritual pilgrimage. Since that time, various cycles in church history have repeated these trends toward one extreme or another, with the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation providing the rule by which the church could measure heresy versus truth.

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[20]*Paradise* Canto XXXIII ll. 46-48.

[21]*Paradise* Canto XXXIII ll. 109-114.

It is in the midst of just such a cycle that *Robert Elsmere* (both book and character) is born. The novel typifies Victorian England, a culture experiencing one of the greatest spiritual upheavals of modern times. Instead of transforming to better understand the goal, many Victorian intellectuals sought to alter the vision itself. In the face of changing times, many factions of Victorian liberalism removed the miraculous elements from Christianity, including the doctrine of the Incarnation. This denial of the supernatural was certainly not new to this generation, but many Victorians certainly saw the "spirit of the age" as an explosive force, the power of which had never yet been seen in any other culture.[22] For some, including Mrs. Humphry Ward, this resulted in a perceived mandate to retrieve the "true" Christianity and shed its diluted or even perverted traditional forms.

A variety of factors contributed to this Victorian milieu and the imprint of each can be seen within Ward's narrative. Thomas Arnold, grandfather of Ward and legendary headmaster of Rugby, said of his early Victorian period, "we have been living […] the life of three hundred years in thirty."[23] Within that period, groundbreaking advances in technology, science, and religion altered the social landscape in drastic ways. Goldwin Smith noted that in this period he found himself in "an age of express-trains, ocean greyhounds, electricity, bicycles, globe-trotting, Evolution, the Higher Criticism, and general excitement and restlessness."[24] Scientific innovation was revolutionizing both the educated and the layperson. On the heels of the enlightenment, empiricism ruled the day and rational thinking overshadowed more abstract and imaginative pursuits. Archaeology became a nationwide obsession and, by Elsmere's time, Charles Darwin had permanently

[22]Newsome, 3. Matthew Arnold's theory of the *zeitgeist* is evident in Ward's work.

[23]Newsome, 1.

[24]Goldwin Smith qtd. in Newsome, 9.

impacted the popular perception of the creation of the world.[25] Historian David Newsome claims this rejection of Genesis's version of events "fostered an escalating skepticism" which trickled down, to some degree, through every level of society. The logical end to Darwin's assertions concerning the origin of man, included questions such as: "If there was no Adam and Eve there was no Garden of Eden. If no Eden, there was no temptation, and no Fall of Man. If no Fall of Man, what became of original sin and the requirement of redemption?"[26] While his impact is, in some cases, overestimated, the importance of his ideas to the later Victorians cannot be denied; where his revelations might not have caused a massive loss of faith, they certainly raised very important questions that could not be ignored by the church or the laity.

Leading intellectuals of the day were dealing with the onset of doubt even before Darwin's discoveries rocked the popular mindset. In addition to science and technology, the importation of Biblical criticism from Germany had a huge impact on the theology of the day. When debating how to interpret Scripture, the even more disturbing question soon became, how authentic were the religious texts to begin with? Newsome notes that even two decades into the 19th century, the elder Thomas Arnold "expressed concern over the fact that the majority of his clerical colleagues were hopelessly unprepared for the shocks that were about to come from Germany."[27] Matthew Arnold would see that truth come to fruition as such critics as F.C. Baur in the eighteenth century and Strauss and Feurbach in the nineteenth became more widely translated and thus widely read; questions about the

[25]Newsome, 204.Newsome provides a succinct and interesting summary of the impact Darwin's major assertions had on Christian orthodoxy.

[26]Newsome, 207.

[27]Newsome, 201.

authenticity of both Luke and Matthew in the New Testament, as well as Daniel in the Old resulted in massive dissension amongst educated clergy. Newsome continues to point toward the inevitability of the ensuing skepticism; if the books were not historically accurate, how could gospel miracles be held valid? Soon the literary repercussions of these philosophical and theological fluctuations were felt across the continent and into Britain with the popular publications of historical renderings of the life of Jesus, especially those by Renan and Strauss (notably translated by George Eliot). It is this vivid atmosphere which educated and shaped the mind of Mary Augusta Ward and these interests play out exactly in her novel, which, while set in the later Victorian days, in many ways encapsulates a previous generation. In her time at Oxford, and even in the years before as a daughter (albeit estranged) of Thomas Arnold the younger, Ward felt the influence of both the liberal movement toward varying degrees of skepticism as represented by Benjamin Jowett, Mark Pattison, the Arnolds, and T.H. Green, as well as the orthodox who struggled to maintain the original goal in the face of mounting opposition, as recorded in the writings of John Henry Newman and Charles Kingsley. Despite their obvious difference, each of these men, in some way, provided precursors to Robert Elsmere.

It would be inaccurate to claim that Darwin's theories or any one development resulted in a complete destruction of the orthodox faith. In fact, in many cases, the most orthodox of Christian figureheads were neither shocked nor appalled by Darwin's work, but at best embraced and appropriated it and, at worst, ignored it as irrelevant.[28] Despite this ecumenical friendliness to Darwin's theories, many Christians were far from strengthened

[28]Ironically it is the ordinarily inimical Charles Kingsley and John Henry Newman who took such a favorable opinion to Darwin.Evidence of Newman's thought is found in Newsome, 203, while Kingsley's novels, such as *The Water Babies*, often suggested evolutionary ideas.

in their faith. In fact, in the face of such numerous changes, many found themselves suddenly unable to maintain the faith of their fathers. We find in Matthew Arnold the prime example of such a case. Uncle to Ward and author of the era's most widely read poem, "Dover Beach," Arnold encapsulates the Victorian religions predicament in his *Preface to God and the Bible* stating that "at the present moment two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to anybody with eyes in his head. One is, that men cannot do without it, the other, that they cannot do with it as it is." [29] This is poetically rendered in his "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" in which he laments the forlorn state of the religious pilgrim, "Wandering between two worlds, one dead/ The other powerless to be born."[30] The result for many of Arnold's contemporary intellectuals was a desire to maintain the moral standard codified in Judeo-Christian teaching, but to "demythologize" the Gospel and Christian history. These elements, converging at once upon an unprepared populace result in what Newsome calls "the phenomenon of "Unbelief" [which] emerged as so evident an intellectual and emotional problem that the whole question of what lay beyond one's life on earth, hardly ever before considered to be a matter for speculation or debate, became the subject of fierce and bitter dispute." The "honest Doubt" of Tennyson, then, becomes the "Cross that thinking people may have to carry," with the alternative being an even further detached religious indifference.[31]

This Doubt, so common in the lives of Victorian Christians and Christians throughout history, is illustrated not only in Robert, but to some degree in nearly every other character in Ward's novel. It forces a redefinition of the pilgrim's goal. No longer are the values

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[29]Arnold, Matthew, *God & the Bible* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1983).

[30]Arnold, Matthew, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," lines 85-86.

[31]Newsome, 195.

taken for granted by generations acceptable at face value. Even for those who, like Robert's faithful wife Catherine, ultimately end up reaffirming the goal, moments of doubt require careful consideration and spiritual perseverance. Suddenly shackled with Doubt, England enters a pivotal new period in which each person must reevaluate the major questions concerning man's ultimate purpose.

Perhaps the most lasting and accurate descriptor of Victorian England, especially the later years in which *Robert Elsmere* is penned, is the word "transitional." One writer informs posterity that he and his colleagues "have written with the conviction that the epoch in which we live is one of profound transformation, intellectual and social, abounding in new needs, new points of view, new questions."[32] Perhaps the most vital of these "new questions" is: What happens to the spiritual pilgrimage when the goal is removed? How does that affect the journey? When the suffering of philosophical doubt interrupts the pilgrimage, the pilgrim experiences what St. John of the Cross terms *la noche oscura* or the dark night of the soul. Just as Dante's pilgrim is faced with a choice in the midst of suffering, so is every Christian. In the ensuing chapters we will determine exactly what this choice means to Robert as well as to those who tangentially impact his journey.

This transitional period called for a redefinition of the presumed goal of the spiritual life. In the face of Doubt, Mrs. Humphry Ward aligns herself with the liberal shift away from traditional orthodoxy toward a redefinition of the goals of man as individual and as a race. However, she fails to see the implications such views have on the integrity of belief and she also fails to realize her own inability to dissociate from tradition. While the Victorian era can certainly be viewed as a crossroads for the Church of England and the

[32]Charles Gore qtd. in Newsome, 2.Notably this quote refers to the volume *Lux Mundi*, which provided the orthodox answer to many of the questions posed by Ward.

individual, it is also important to remember that, at the core, the Christological concerns of the nineteenth century are the same as those of the fourth. A journey through Robert's spiritual sojourn will illuminate the problematic ending and provide unexpected support for a return to orthodoxy. Just as her creation will claim, history truly does repeat itself in the individual.

CHAPTER TWO

Pilgrim in Crisis

In an interesting twist on convention, Mrs. Humphry Ward marries off her protagonist in the opening volume. Marriage, the usual climax of the genre, is instead the starting point, an arrangement which transforms *Robert Elsmere* into the story of a marriage as opposed to the story of a wedding. Therefore, much of Robert's character is exposed through relational means; his interaction with other characters often provides a truer picture than his self-analysis would afford. The final problematic deathbed scene, in which we are left with only husband and wife struggling to hold on to their hard fought unity, leaves us with little doubt as to the importance of this core relationship to the novel. However, in order to treat the ending, which may allow Robert a far more orthodox death than many critics, or the author herself, might permit, we must first explore Robert's personal journey; the crisis that interrupts his spiritual path is both individual and relational and must be treated in that order.

La Selva Oscura[1]

> Was this what lay before the minister of God, now in the *selva oscura* of life? The selling of the Master, of 'the love so sweet, the unction spiritual,' for an intellectual satisfaction, the ravaging of all the fair places of the heart by an intellectual need!
>
> …….
>
> Midway upon the journey of our life
> I found myself in a dark wilderness,
> for I had wandered from the straight and true,
> How hard a thing it is to tell about,

[1]The dark wood.

that wilderness so savage, dense, and harsh,
even to think of it renews my fear!![2]

In the dark wood of philosophical doubt and dread, paralyzed with fear, it seems impossible for Dante's pilgrim to regain the road of faith which leads to communion with others and with God.[3] Ward places her protagonist in the same position as Dante's lost traveler in the first of a series of direct connections between the two.[4] Late in the Murewell section of the novel, Ward summons Dante's imagery as Robert, a "minister of God," finds himself in the "*selva oscura* of life."[5] Having lived a life of faith and devotion to Christian tradition and Scriptural precepts, his way is lost as he begins to doubt the entire basis of his faith. Months of study have led to this intellectual and emotional upheaval as bit by bit his modern learning has eroded the faith that once guided his spiritual path. Robert describes his crisis as "the selling of the Master, of the love so sweet, the unction spiritual, for an intellectual satisfaction, the ravaging of all the fair places of the heart by an intellectual need!"[6] Already, Robert has begun mentally to separate reason from faith and to privilege the needs of his intellect over the needs of his soul. As long as this dichotomy remains, Robert's spiritual life will be an agonizing struggle to find reconciliation. In this, Robert's individual story mirrors that of his author and of his generation.

The roadmap to Robert's crisis is found in the description of Squire Wendover's extensive library, a room which represents the forceful pull toward intellectual pursuit with

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[2]Dante Alighieri, *Inferno,* trans. Anthony Esolen(New York: Modern Library, 1996) Canto I ll 1-4

[3]Note Dante's use of the pronoun "our" which universalizes the experience.

[4]Dante is 35 in the year 1300 when the action of the *Inferno* took place, also a comparable age to Christ in the years of his ministry, death, and resurrection.Robert is in his early thirties as well.

[5]Ward, 342.

[6]Ward, 342. Here Ward quotes from the Book of Common Prayer's "The Form and Manner of Ordering Priests"

which Robert continually struggles. Having enjoyed unlimited access to the Squire's impressive books, Robert excitedly describes to his friend Langham his personal take on the shelved histories.

> 'This is how I interpret this room,' said Robert, looking round it. 'Here are the books he collected at Oxford in the Tractarian movement and afterward. Look here,' and he pulled out a volume of St. Basil.
> Langham looked, and saw on the title-page a note in faded characters: '*Given to me by Newman at Oxford, in 1845.*'
> 'Ah, of course, he was one of them in '45; he must have left them very soon after,' said Langham reflectively.
> Robert nodded. 'But look at them! There are the Tracts, all the Fathers, all the Councils, and masses, as you see, of Anglican theology. Now look at the next case, nothing but eighteenth century!'
> 'I see,--from the Fathers to the Philosophers, from Hooker to Hume. How history repeats itself in the individual!'[7]

This perceived intellectual progression represents the history of the Squire and the history of many Oxford Christians turned skeptics. Langham's presence in the scene is telling as he is the direct result of such an evolution of thought and belief. For the author, this movement through theological history is bound to end in disillusionment and rejection once the discrepancies of the early church are revealed; she, of course, hopes to steer the course to avoid a complete break from Christianity, but she foresees an inevitable rupture nonetheless. History will, in fact, repeat in Robert as he moves further from these orthodox predecessors and into an eventual free sampling of the Squire's heretical volumes. Peterson notes it is not the Squire, nor is it Darwin, who leads Robert down his wayward path, but his study of early Roman civilization.[8] The Squire's collection represents for Ward, the mass of German scholarship that challenged religious conceptions of the day, specifically focusing on the time period in question. This scholarship claimed that the

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[7]Ward, 195-196.

[8]Peterson, 148.

mind of modern man was so intellectually superior to its forefathers that the stories told in the Gospels could only be read as "fanciful creations of an age predisposed to miracles." [9] Robert's gradual realization of this during the months at Murewell in some ways mirrors the author's own extended grappling with the subject as her years at Oxford exposed her to many similar theories.

In fact, Ward was not hard-pressed to find precedent for this storyline. Intellectual doubt of the Elsmere sort is prevalent in a Victorian society reeling from the onslaught of scientific advancements as well as these discoveries of German higher criticism. Ironically, Robert and his creator seem to consider his humanistic philosophy a new phenomenon. It seems, in his denial of miracles and the divinity of Christ, that Robert feels he is addressing a new issue, the resolution of which is uniquely pressing for his own generation.[10] As discussed before, however, the relationship between the natural world and the spiritual world is an ancient concern. Newman recognizes this same trend of intellectual progressiveness in the ancient Antiochene church noting it eventually "ended in teaching them to regard the ecclesiastical authorities of former times as on a level with the uneducated and unenlightened of their own days."[11] Newman abhorred the religious liberalism embodied in cases such as Robert's because he viewed it as "the mistake of

[9]Smith, 31.

[10]In his introduction to Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, C.S. Lewis claims the ancient writer's "approach to the Miracles is badly needed today, for it is the final answer to those who object to the as 'arbitrary and meaningless violations of the laws of Nature,' thus reinforcing the cyclical nature of theological trends.

[11]John Henry Newman, *Arians of the Fourth Century* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908) 1:2.

subjecting to human judgment those revealed doctrines which are in their nature beyond and independent of it"[12]

It is not that Ward was actually unaware of this critical trend. In fact, it is her own study of church dogma in fifth and sixth century Spain, as well as her study of the eighteenth century Germans which leads her to conclude that the Gospels are nothing more than cultural representations of a particular time and place. Her disposal of the miraculous element, similar to her character's, is based on a belief that because miracles no longer happen, they must never have happened and any record of them can be assigned to the credulity of naïve and unscientific people.[13] Smith connects the popularity of *Robert Elsmere* to the playing out of this religious drama at a national level. Ward's weakness, then, as we will see in various places in the novel, is her inability to account for the opposing sides of the argument. Newman's faith was not destroyed by his study of church history, rather it was strengthened. Even Kingsley, despite his bitter antagonism toward Rome, found spiritual sustenance in much of the Church's earliest teachings. For someone so deeply educated on the issue, it seems disingenuous for Ward not to offer an alternative view, or even to recognize that the same debate was not a new phenomenon but had existed for centuries.

Ward is not alone in her continual privileging of the nineteenth century over every other generation. Of the many inferred influences to be addressed in the book, the only admitted philosophical contributor is Matthew Arnold. Ward's obvious reverence for her famous uncle led some critics to question her originality. Gladstone said of Ward, "[She] is

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[12] From Newman's work on the Arians who, significantly, shared many of Robert's theological leanings, especially the denial of Christ as divine.Newman's study of the Arians led to his writing of Tract 90 and to a focus on Athanasius' work on the Incarnation.

[13]Smith, 21.

much to be liked personally but is a fruit I think of what must be called Arnoldism."[14] Perhaps the strongest connection to be drawn from this is to link the philosophy developed by Robert to that expounded in Arnold's *Literature in Dogma*, published in 1873. Oscar Wilde reportedly complained that *Robert Elsmere* was "*Literature and Dogma* without the Literature" and it is difficult to ignore the family resemblance.[15] *Literature and Dogma* is Arnold's attempt to both debunk a Christianity he views as superstitious and to reenergize the moral precepts found within that same tradition. He develops the idea of *aberglaube* as "extra-belief" that has been built up over time to supplant the simpler truth of the Gospel.[16] Despite his wish to overthrow orthodoxy, Arnold simultaneously laments the loss of Biblical influence in the lives of his contemporaries. This paradoxical struggle to merge liberalism and conservatism is reflected in the life of his niece who, despite her actively heterodox religious views, was miserable at being denied communion within the Church.

We see in Robert the fictional representation of what Ward's "Arnoldism" longed for; we also again see Robert as a type of his age. Ward makes this connection in the original manuscript for the book when she points out Robert's status as a "reproduction in miniature" of what was happening in Britain, as well as what happened at any other critical moment in the history of man. The cancelled passage continues:

> It was the slow and gradual substitution of one set of preconceptions for another, the steady imperceptible advance from the presuppositions of English orthodoxy, involving a double order of things, spiritual & material, continually interrupting & intersecting each other, to the presuppositions of science, in which the mind assumes the "rationality of the world" & the unity of all experience.

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[14]W.E. Gladstone qtd. in Peterson, 17.

[15]Wilde qtd. in Peterson, 31.

[16]Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970).

She continues to highlight the universality of this experience saying,

> […] for the common understanding of man the great kaleidoscope of experience changes, and passes into ever fresh combinations and leading patterns, with every alteration of the point of view, so, in the history of the individual, the same moments of crisis occur, preceded by the same periods of half-conscious preparation. All that vast confusion of circumstance which had been to a greater or less degree enslaved had been brought to order by one master set of conceptions, resumes as it were its inherent right of sway, and dictates another system of the mind, as a nation changes the form of its government.[17]

As a microcosm of human experience, an understanding of Robert's plight is important for the individual, as well as the community in which this phenomenon has occurred so consistently over time.

In pairing her pilgrim with Dante in this reference to the dark wood, Ward does stray from the structure of the original conception in a subtle yet important way; whereas Dante's encounter in the dark wood occurs in the opening lines, Robert's appears much later in the narrative. This arrangement invites us then to question what led Robert to this point and how that path affects his present and his future.

In his somewhat ambivalent review of the novel, Walter Pater admits that while it is admirable of Robert to decline his ordination, the situation is not a shining endorsement of his integrity. Pater is right in saying "it strikes us as a blot on [Robert's] philosophical pretensions that he should have been both so late in perceiving the difficulty, and then so sudden and trenchant in dealing with so great and complex a question."[18] Robert, despite the author's clear adoration, could often be accused of a passive and shallow naïveté which contributes to the difficulties he encounters, as well as the suffering of those around him.

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[17]Ward qtd. in Peterson, 146-147.

[18]Walter Pater, *Essays from 'The Guardian'* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910) 67; Gladstone notes this same weakness in his review as he points out Ward's neglect of Christian apologetics of the day.

Pater's charge could also be laid at his initial decision to take orders. In Robert's earliest announcement of his intentions for ordination we see perhaps our first clue toward this character flaw, as well as a possible reason for the delay in recognizing the difficulties of the ministerial life. At Oxford he tells Henry Grey, "I never had any [difficulties]. Perhaps,' he added with sudden humility, "it is because I have never gone deep enough. What I believe might have been worth more if I had had more struggle; but it has all seemed so plain."[19] Only unexamined and untested faith would seem plain, neither of which is ideal for a leader of a congregation. Even Catherine, whose faith we might say is never questioned, would certainly never claim her spirituality to be plain. In this early scene we see in Robert a dangerous inclination toward going with the flow of popular opinion, letting others choose his path for him rather than sticking firmly to his own set of standards and beliefs.

We see also his early tendency to separate reason from faith. In the commentary on this early Oxford passage, the narrator tells us that Robert's "inmost fortress was held by something wholly distinct from intellectual conviction –by moral passion, by love, by feeling, by that mysticism, in short, which no healthy youth should be without."[20] We may later wonder whether Robert has anything comparable to a fortress left within him when he, as many have suggested, so easily succumbs to the doubt of the Squire; however, at this juncture it is his moral feeling, a conviction not based on rationality, but on a deep faith in things unseen that drives him forward into the life of the spirit.

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[19]Ward, 65.

[20]Ward, 66.

It is in this state of mind he pledges his love to Catherine, vowing to forever be satisfied in that union; "'In her and her only is my heart's desire! She and she only if she will, and God will, shall be my wife!"[21] This vow produces in him a love of community which will be severely lacking later on the journey. In committing to Catherine, Robert finds himself suddenly

> […] knit to his kind, to his race, as he had never felt before. It was as though, after a long apprenticeship, be had sprung suddenly into maturity--entered at last into the full human heritage. But the very intensity and solemnity of his own feeling gave him a rare clear-sightedness. He realized that he had no certainty of success, scarcely even an entirely reasonable hope. But what of that? Were they not together, alone, practically, in these blessed solitudes? Would they not meet to-morrow, and next day, and the day after? Were not time and opportunity all his own? How kind her looks are even now! Courage! And through that maidenly kindness his own passion shall send the last, transmuting glow.[22]

If Westmoreland places Robert in communion with his wife and solidifies his direction, it is the dissolution of this community that leads to and accompanies his crisis; this shift away from community and into isolation is the inversion of the pattern Dante witnesses as he travels from *Inferno*, where the damned are utterly devoid of any shared sympathy, up the Mountain of *Purgatory* where the souls are being molded together by their experience, and finally to *Paradise* where pure community is established. Instead of growing closer to his partner, Robert weakens their link and hides his activities in a mixture of shame and protectiveness. Early in their days at Murewell we see Robert's attention being diverted from his beloved wife, often instead placed on the ominous figure of Squire Wendover. The words he spoke to Catherine, convincing her to unite her life to his, provide a chilling opposition to the events that take place in the couple's first

[21]Ward, 87.

[22]Ward, 87.

home. In Westmoreland he passionately claimed "I dare not think what my future might be without you to guide, to inspire, to bless--dare not--lest with a word you should plunge me into an outer darkness I cannot face'"[23] However, the temptation of the Squire and the intellectual world he represents begins to break down what Robert once saw as the central relation in his life. The promise of the Squire's first appearance is representative of this dissolution.

> Robert's eager soul meanwhile, for once irresponsive to Catherine's, was full of nothing but the Squire. At last the moment was come, and that dumb spiritual friendship he had formed through these long months with the philosopher and the *savant* was to be tested by sight and speech of the man. He bade himself a hundred times pitch his expectations low. But curiosity and hope were keen, in spite of everything.[24]

This initial meeting, of course, disappointed those keen hopes. He found the Squire to be antagonistic and demeaning, and the dinner proved less a show of hospitality and more a chance to put the meddlesome new rector in his place. Over time, however, this early hostility wears away and the fascination and temptation returns; "But the vivider and the keener grew this new mental life of Elsmere's, the more constant became his sense of soreness as to that foolish and motiveless quarrel which divided him from the Squire."[25] Note in this passage, and throughout this volume of the book, Robert's relationship with the Squire grows in direct proportion to his mental activity. The separation of reason and faith continues with reason stepping forward in the race for Robert's soul. By Christmas, Robert finds the temptation too great and finally succumbs to the desire of the Squire's infamous writings: "The Idols of the Market Place" and

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[23]Ward, 143.

[24]Ward, 224.

[25]Ward, 278.

"Essays on English Culture." These volumes represent what was once the antithesis of Robert's stance, attacking both the belief and education on which he was raised. However, at this point along the path, he is privileging his desire to taste forbidden wares over his unity with Catherine: "He said nothing of the order to Catherine; somehow there were by now two or three portions of his work, two or three branches of his thought, which had fallen out of their common discussion. After all she was not literary and with all their oneness of soul there could not be an *identity* of interests or pursuits."[26] This condescension and justification of deceit is a far cry from the openness and oneness of spirit he once used as an enticement in his pursuit of Catherine.

In this volume of the book, we see Robert, despite his own judgments to the contrary, turning away from what he has always loved and from commitments he once staked his life on, toward the antithesis of these things. Despite the literary cues warning us of the Squire's danger, Robert plunges straight ahead into his confidence. The hall, said to be enveloped by thorny hedges as in a fairy tale, as well as the identification of the Squire with Medusa, whose severed head, when looked upon, turns man to stone, are not warning enough.[27] Robert is continually drawn to the intellectualism embodied in the Squire and thus away from his wife, a separation that will have dire consequences in the ensuing months.

Robert's increasing fondness for the Squire is reminiscent of Dante's pity for the souls of the damned in *Inferno*. In the circle of the diviners, Dante, overcome with pity, turns away in tears. He entreats the reader to judge him mercifully, asking if he would

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[26]Ward, 279.

[27]Ward may have found inspiration for the Squire's Hall in Buscot House, an estate not far from Oxford.

not have done the same when faced with such a contorted image of man; the image we all share twisted into something so frighteningly perverse. Similarly, Robert's attraction to the Squire's intellect is mixed with a current of sympathy for the old man's lonely plight; a family history of mental disease has left him frightened and lonely. This tie is strengthened by Robert's realization of how much he and the Squire are alike. Virgil, though, rebukes Dante harshly for his tears, asking "Even now, with all the other fools!/ Here pity lives the best when it is dead./ Who is more wicked than the man who longs/ to make God's judgment yield to human force?"[28] The phrase "even now" refers to Dante's place in the journey; he has already witnessed many of hell's painful lessons. By now he should be learning something about the nature of God and of Sin. Similarly, Robert should be more aware of the Squire's deception, recognizing his goal from the outset was to break down the minister's faith. Wendover has identified Robert's weakness from their first meeting and has been exploiting it ever since. A more self-aware Robert would also be more cognizant of the spiritual state of others and better able to perform his own duties as minister of God rather than being pushed about by every personality he encounters.

Not only does Robert's increasing attraction to reason over faith result in a separation from Catherine, but it also separates him from God. In one of his most agonizing episodes Robert feels this separation keenly; "'Everything divides me from Thee!' he could have cried in St. Augustine's manner 'Books, and friends, and work--all seem to hide Thee from me. Why am I so passionate for this and that, for all these sections and fragments of Thee?

[28] *Inferno* Canto XX ll. 27-30.

Oh, for the One, the All! Fix, there thy resting-place, my soul!'"[29] We are again reminded of the need for the pilgrim to maintain his hold on the ultimate goal: the vision of God. In a moment of sincere clarity, Robert here realizes, for however brief a time, it is his self that needs to be transformed, the self full of desires and distractions, in order to achieve the eternal communion for which he was made.

Il Gran Rifiuto[30]

All these years of happy spiritual certainty, of rejoicing oneness with Christ, to end in this wreck and loss! Was it not indeed 'il gran rifiuto' –the greatest of which human daring is capable?

…….

When I had recognized a few of these,
I saw and knew at once the shade of him,
The craven one, who made the great denial.[31]

In this isolated and vulnerable state, Robert comes to his conclusion that faith and reason cannot coexist. His inner fortress of the Oxford days has been supplanted by the guiding torch of Science; little room is left for faith, at least not faith of the orthodox kind. This switching of theological sides has been criticized by Gladstone, Pater, and others, as one of Ward's weakest points, inclining her novel towards propaganda instead of credible narration. It has often been said she does not allow orthodoxy its fair hearing, which may amount to either poor writing or willful audience manipulation.

One of the few verbal objections Robert offers to the Squire's insistent denigrating of faith comes in the course of their walks. Already considerably far down the path, Robert says:

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[29]Ward, 266.

[30]The great refusal

[31]*Inferno* Canto III ll. 58-60

> 'I think we ought to understand one another perhaps, Mr. Wendover,' Robert said, speaking under a quick sense of oppression, but with his usual dignity and bright courtesy. 'I know your opinions, of course, from your book; you know what mine, as an honest man, must be, from the position I hold. My conscience does not forbid me to discuss anything, only--I am no match for you on points of scholarship, and I should just like to say once for all, that to me, whatever else is true, the religion of Christ is true. I am a Christian and a Christian minister. Therefore, whenever we come to discuss what may be called Christian evidence, I do it with reserves, which you would not have. I believe in an Incarnation, a Resurrection, a Revelation. If there are literary difficulties, I must want to smooth them away--you may want to make much of them. We come to the matter from different points of view. You will not quarrel with me for wanting to make it clear. It isn't as if we differed slightly. We differ fundamentally--is it not so?'[32]

Robert seems worryingly complacent in these words, satisfied they are strong enough to protect him from the Squire's attack. The continuing conversation finds "Robert joining in more buoyantly than ever, perhaps because he had achieved a necessary but disagreeable thing and got done with it." Despite this unwarranted satisfaction however, we are also given a stark foreshadowing of what is to come as we are told, "In reality he had but been doing as the child does when it sets up its sand-barrier against the tide."[33]

This image certainly seems appropriate considering how little fight we actually see from Robert in the pages of the novel. Robert, facing a barrage of attacks from various points in the theological battle, offers little positive avowals of his own. This discrepancy led Herbert Cowell to announce "We certainly are not prepared to believe […] that modern Oxford has much to be proud of when she sends forth a distinguished alumnus so indifferently equipped that when, as rector, he presents himself in the Squire's hall, it

[32]Ward, 305.

[33]Ward, 306.

resembles nothing so much as a lamb led to the slaughter."[34] Pater also notes the lack of representation from a side that has many compelling arguments to offer. In the version offered by Ward, we are left to wonder how Christianity could have survived a day, much less thousands of years, if it could be so easily shredded by the slightest inquiry.

Ward offers some explanation of this notable deficiency in her novel when she says that during her many revision sessions, it is the dialogue of theology and history between Squire and rector that was most drastically reduced. In favor of the more human elements of the story, she cut much of the theoretical content. While this does partially explain why the relational elements of *Robert Elsmere* are so much more compelling than the more didactic religious segments, it remains a serious flaw. In working with the manuscripts, Peterson notes that it was mainly Robert's arguments which were reduced and reworked while the Squire's speeches remained largely intact.[35] In the original manuscript, Robert addresses many of the obvious issues we find lacking in the final product: for example, the assertion that disbelief in miracles is based on just as solid a set of indemonstrable assumptions as is belief. This intentional weakening of the Christian case results in a simultaneous weakening of Elsmere's character, a character too often passive and weak-willed to begin with.

Another difficulty resulting from these revision tactics is that Ward leaves the Squire to argue her case. The Squire represents all the views Ward hopes to impress upon her readership as truths that Christians must face. However, the Squire is consistently

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[34]Herbert Cowell qtd in Peterson, 172.

[35]Peterson

characterized as a malevolent and menacing character. It seems counterintuitive to have such a man present the argument the author wishes us to accept.

Having explored the path that leads to this point, we must rejoin Robert in his moment of crisis. Alone, in the dark wood, Robert ironically relies on ancient creedal language to determine the state of his heart. The outcome is significant to his spiritual journey:

> "Do I believe in God? Surely, surely! "Though He slay me yet will I trust Him!" Do I believe in Christ? Yes, -in the teacher, the martyr, the symbol to us Westerns of all things heavenly and abiding, the image and pledge of the invisible life of the spirit, -with all my soul and mind!
> "But in the Man-God, the Word from Eternity, -in a wonder-working Christ, in a risen and ascended Jesus, in the living Intercessor and Mediator for the lives of His doomed Brethren?"[36]

Ward again summons Dante as Robert views his denial of the divine Christ as "*il gran rifiuto*."[37] Many scholars attribute this reference to Pope Celestine V who abdicated his holy vocation in the face of political pressure. Here Dante implies that sins of omission are as damnable as sins of commission; a refusal to fulfill the work to which one has been called by God is unacceptable to a pilgrim struggling to achieve just that. Robert fears he is making this same refusal and, in many ways, he is. He abandons his calling to minister within the Church, abandons Murewell, and to a certain degree, abandons his wife and the promises he made her. Notice it is here, in the midst of Robert's greatest confusion that Madame de Netteville enters the scene. Later, Robert's experience with her will reveal the extreme extent of a man of God's refusal to live as he is called. Robert's nearly willful naïveté and lack of responsibility comes painfully close to costing him everything.

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[36]Ward, 342.

[37]Ward, 342; *Inferno*

In leaving the dark wood, we must not miss the elements of hope that underlie both Dante and Robert's plight. Dante takes notice of the moon whose shoulders are "robe with the rays of that wandering light of Heaven that leads all men aright on every road."[38] Similarly, Robert's own paragraph of crisis, begun in dismay ends in hope as the terror makes way for a "sense of liberty –of infinite expansion."[39] This recalls Dante's insistence on "*libero arbitrio*" as the proof and means of Divine love. In order to travel further down Robert's path, we should consider the words of F.D. Maurice who, in reference to his own similar struggle to maintain faith realizes, "I know that we may struggle with the Light, that we may choose death. But I know also that Love does overcome this rebellion. I know that I am bound to believe that its power is greater than every other. […] How can I reconcile these contradictory discoveries? I cannot reconcile them. I know no theory which can. But…I dare not fix any limits to the power of His Love." Robert finds himself in this agonizing spiritual malaise because he has strayed from the path lit by love. Despite his flaws, however, Robert consistently seeks a return to this path and is thus ultimately delivered. As previously stated, *Robert Elsmere* is a story of human relationships. While he is sometimes negatively influenced by others, it is ultimately through the novel's relationships that Love reveals its power in Robert's life, and it is through those relationships he will find his path out of the dark wood and into the light of reconciliation.

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[38] *Inferno*, Canto I.

[39] Ward, 343.

CHAPTER THREE

The Pagan Guides

One of Dante's most striking and effective strategies is his use of the unlikely guide. Virgil, Dante's real-life poetic master, seems an improbable choice to guide the struggling Christian poet through the afterlife and toward his vision of God. However, this arrangement adds another layer of theological depth to Dante's poem reinforcing his belief that the profane can, and should, lead to the divine. Also, by the end, it emphasizes the difference between the love Dante had for the worldly versus the love he develops for the divine.

Just as Dante is guided through his spiritual journey by the pagan poet, Virgil, Robert's pilgrimage is also enabled by secular influences. Perhaps the three most central figures to Robert's intellectual, and in turn, spiritual development are the characters of Edward Langham, Henry Grey, and Squire Wendover. Although each represents a different aspect of the heretical spectrum, each provides a picture of what Robert could easily become, or have been, had he chosen slightly different paths out of the dark wood. In examining these three guides in relation to Robert, especially concerning the life of the mind, we see both the growth they inspire and the limitations by which they are bound.

Paralysis of the Soul

> Life after life flowers out from the darkness and sinks back into it again. And in the interval what agony, what disillusion! All the apparatus of a universe that men may know what it is to hope and fail, to win and lose! *Happy!*--in this world, 'where men sit and hear each other groan.' His friend's confidence only made Langham as melancholy as Job.[1]

[1]Ward, 182.

…….

But you, why do you turn back to such pain?
Why don't you climb that hill that brings delight,
the origin and cause of every joy?"[2]

Mrs. Humphry Ward (and perhaps literary posterity) viewed Oxford as a microcosm of the Victorian struggle between faith and doubt. It is within the confines of the "city of dreaming spires" that the religious, philosophical, and scientific pursuits found voice in such instances as the Oxford Movement, aestheticism, and others. Ward however, is not satisfied in appropriating merely the setting, or the overall spirit of Oxford, but also seeks to embody in her characters types of the mindsets that dominated the literary and intellectual scene.

The first pagan figure Robert encounters is just such a creation. The often wretched figure of his Oxford tutor, Edward Langham, represents for the author the caricature of the skeptic, one who is unable to firmly lay hold of any particular set of beliefs or course of action. Langham's character is reminiscent of literary critic Walter Pater,[3] forerunner of the aesthetic movement and close friend of the author's husband. Mrs. Humphry Ward's literary knowledge of the Swiss philosopher and poet Amiel,[4] also provided a model for this isolated figure whose spiritual, and thus material, paralysis serve as a foil to the "vigorous optimism" embodied in her title character.[5] It is tempting to dismiss the detached tutor with this cursory glance at his literary models, identifying him as a type of

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[2]*Inferno* Canto I ll. 76-78

[3]John Sutherland, *Mrs. Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-eminent Edwardian* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990); This connection is made by many critics.

[4]Sutherland.

[5]Peterson writes that "deeply as her Protestant instincts responded to the lonely, austere note of "the literature of introspection," Mrs. Humphry Ward eventually concluded that the truly reasonable mystic was not Amiel, but Robert Elsmere."This commentary further reveals the importance of the dynamic between skeptic guide and trusting student to the novel's development.

the age and nothing more. However, a deeper journey into the character of Edward Langham enriches the reading of *Robert Elsmere*, lifting its powerful love story from merely an individualized instance to a commentary on the universal struggle to live in communion with our fellow humans. By analyzing this strange and skeptical character's response to the call of love in comparison to Robert's, as well as his response to the rational life of the mind in comparison with the Squire's, we come to realize the rich tapestry of nuance and depth that undergirds Robert's tale.

Just six years his senior, Langham is Robert's first introduction to the world of the mind, teaching his young charge the importance of critical analysis and intellectual integrity. However, by the end of the novel, Langham ceases to guide even himself forward in any progressive manner. In Langham we see a tortured soul who plays alternate roles in the novel, beginning as Robert's guide and shifting into a pilgrim in his own right when faced with his own spiritual crisis. Unfortunately, where Robert, like Dante, chooses the life enabled and enriched by love, Langham retreats into his self-made prison, committing a spiritual suicide that forfeits his journey toward the beatific vision.

The climax of Langham's story comes late in the novel as he chooses between a life of love and action and a virtual death in life. However, the key to his character is given in the earlier descriptions of his life as a student and tutor. Our first introduction to Langham is centered around his physical features. His personal beauty is described at length in the narrative: "The eye was wavering and profoundly melancholy, all the movements of the tall, finely-built frame were hesitating and doubtful. It was as though the man were suffering from paralysis of some moral muscle or other; as if some of the

normal springs of action in him had been profoundly or permanently weakened."[6] Such a description identifies his outward appearance with the state of his soul whose paralysis will be revealed as Langham's story unfolds. This crippling indecision, belied by his physical appearance and described somewhat comically as an inability to determine his own dinner or decide upon the state of the weather, is rooted in Langham's family history and his own days as a young student full of potential and dreams.

Upon matriculation, Langham the student showed much literary promise. The son of a provincial doctor, his dreamer's spirit had been a source of shame during his formative years. At Oxford, he soon found an outlet for his ethereal peculiarities and his

> brooding, gifted nature had a moment of sudden and, as it seemed to the old people in Gainsborough, most reprehensible expansion. Poems were sent to them, cut out of one or the other of the leading periodicals, with their son's initials appended, and articles of philosophical art-criticism, published while the boy was still an undergraduate--which seemed to the stern father everything that was sophistical and subversive.[…]. The father warned him grimly that he was not going to spend his hard-earned savings on the support of a free-thinking scribbler, and the young man wrote no more till just after he had taken a first in Greats. [7]

This description may be the origin of what will prove to be Langham's downfall: emotive surges followed immediately by depressed inactivity.

The trouble at home, however, would be intensified as his professional life took a similar turn. After earning his First, Langham published another challenging and subversive piece in one of the leading reviews entitled "The Ideals of Modern Culture." Instead of earning him the praise of his peers, the publication cost him a probable professorship at "one of the narrowest and most backward" of Oxford colleges. This,

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[6]Ward, 52.

[7]Ward, 53.

coupled with his father's official withdrawal of financial support, left the young intellectual wounded and lost.

These early blows determined the course (or lack thereof) of Langham's once-promising career. Earning a fellowship at the more liberal St. Anselm's offered little relief from his emotional stagnation. The early clash with his father

> represented a moment of energy, of comparative success, which never recurred. It was as though this outburst of action and liberty had disappointed him, as if some deep-rooted instinct--cold, critical, reflective--had reasserted itself, condemning him and his censors equally. The uselessness of utterance, the futility of enthusiasm, the inaccessibility of the ideal, the practical absurdity of trying to realize any of the mind's inward dreams: these were the kind of considerations which descended upon him, slowly and fatally, crushing down the newly springing growths of action or of passion. […] So he wrote no more, he quarreled no more, he meddled with the great passionate things of life and expression no more.[8]

The sensitive Langham was so wounded by his early disappointments that the idea of success became repugnant. As a result, Langham's creativity and soul were stifled under the weight of fear and disappointment. As a teacher, he had little success. Despite the depth of his knowledge, his lack of enthusiasm and vigor did little to endear him to his students.

The words "he ceased to compose" speak to more than just his profession. Upon Robert's arrival, just a few years later, Langham has become "Altogether a melancholy, pitiable man –at once thorough-going sceptic and thorough-going idealist, the victim of that critical sense which says No to every impulse, and is always restlessly, and yet hopelessly, seeking the future through the neglected and outraged present."[9] By the time

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[8]Ward, 53.

[9]Ward, 54.

Robert arrives in his office, Langham has gained a reputation as an eccentric hermit, caring little for the outside world, except that it not encroach upon his reclusive bliss. Robert, full of youthful optimism and vigor disturbed the impassive Langham who had long lived in the comfort of his solitude. Strangely affected by the youth, Langham soon took on Robert's studies, working for his success far harder than the young man could for his own. Robert's inability to take home a First in Greats affected Langham as yet another proof of the futility of all pursuits; he now had one more excuse to avoid trying for anything more. Even when the tutor is offered one of the most prestigious fellowships in his field, thus proving his professional worth, he cannot appreciate the affirmation and refuses the offer; he is firmly planted in the comfort provided by habitual self-loathing.

Although Langham's relationship with Robert portrays the tutor in a negative light for all his sarcastic, cold, detachment, the relationship might belie a more positive truth as well. One wonders if, in Robert, Langham sees what he could have been and would be if his intense fear and self-consciousness were to relieve their vice-like grip on his soul. Certainly Robert can take much of Langham's life as a warning in his own philosophical wanderings. This parallel is most clearly elucidated in the men's relations with the Leyburn sisters. It is at this point that Langham's role as guide begins to shift and he must choose on his own whether to pursue the "delectable mountain" offered to the spiritual pilgrim or to turn away from his soul's ultimate goal.

Although, no doubt, Langham provides what the author calls "the germ" of Robert's future intellectual bent, his introduction of the pupil to Henry Grey in many ways marks the end of his authoritative influence over Robert. In fact, Langham's physical

emergence in the novel positions him as following in Robert's footsteps instead of vice versa as the tutor's life is overturned by his newfound feelings for Rose Leyburn. Some critics have claimed that the story of Langham and Rose detracts from Mrs. Humphry Ward's novel, weighing down the narrative with excess characters and complications.[10] However, a deeper analysis may prove the relationship between these two peripheral characters is central to the life of the novel as it throws into relief Robert and Catherine's choice to love in the face of adversity, to maintain faith in spite of fear.

It is exactly that fear that marks the moment of choice in the life of the pilgrim, as evidenced in Dante, Robert, and Langham. Langham's crisis in the narrative marks the cessation of his role of guide and provides a striking parallel to his now friend. At this juncture, Langham abdicates his Virgilian responsibilities and becomes a pilgrim on his own journey through the dark wood. Revisiting this pivotal moment in *Inferno*, the pilgrim, finding himself lost in the dark wood, espies Mount Purgatory and its "sunny summit," but in fear, turns back. This fear is mirrored in the character of Edward Langham who, when presented with love and all of its purgative redemption, chooses instead a life of denial and despair. We have seen this tendency in Langham before and are familiar with its causes; however, the figure of Rose threatens to break through this habituated existence and invigorate the still young man anew. Langham himself recognizes this moment as an opportunity to step out of the dark wood of doubt and wandering. Enslaved to his fear, however, Langham's pilgrimage ends in spiritual suicide instead of his longed-for transcendence.

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[10]Gladstone.

Just before his arrival in Murewell we are told that Langham's withdrawal from the world has reached an unprecedented seclusion, the refusal of the Scotch professorship marking perhaps the last glimmer of professional hope. This sequestration in some ways endears the man to Robert all the more, as Catherine notices her husband's "gratitude" has been transformed into "a matter of reflection and resolution."[11] We see that Langham's life has reached a new pinnacle of stagnation and his impending love affair with Rose will offer the only way out.

The unlikely pairing of the stoic Langham and the vibrant Rose may not be as improbable as it first appears. In fact, the earliest chapters of the novel reveal Rose's ideal mate as a man who no one but her can interest or intrigue; the world at large, and especially Catherine and the values she represents, will not understand the couple's deep passion in her naïve scheme. Similarly, we are told that the only vein of life remaining in Langham is his love of the arts; music, theatre, and paintings, all speak to his inner soul the way no person is any longer able to. Realizing this, it is clearer to see Langham's initial aloofness and Rose's garden concert as the ultimate attraction between a pair so painfully incomprehensible to their onlookers.

More evident than the love story of this section of the novel, however, is the continuing story of fear and paralysis of will, the origins of which we have already discussed. Langham is painfully consistent in his inconsistencies. We see the results of his diffident nature applied to the situation early in his visit as we are privy to his thoughts:

> And, after all, the experience promised to be pleasant. His fastidious love for the quieter, subtler sorts of beauty was touched by the Elsmere

[11]Ward, 157.

> surroundings. And whatever Miss Leyburn might be, she was not commonplace. The demon of convention had no large part in *her!* Langham lay awake for a time analyzing his impressions of her with some gusto, and meditating, with a whimsical candor which seldom failed him, on the manner in which she had trampled on him, and the reasons why.[12]

The coldness of his heart begins to warm as Langham cannot help but be enamoured with the girl. A contentment, even the possible beginnings of happiness, is evident in these thoughts. However, they are short lived.

> He woke up, however, in a totally different frame of mind. He was preeminently a person of moods, dependent, probably, as all moods are, on certain obscure physical variations. And his mental temperature had run down in the night. The house, the people who had been fresh and interesting to him twelve hours before, were now the burden he had more than half-expected them to be. He lay and thought of the unbroken solitude of his college rooms, of Senancour's flight from human kind, of the uselessness of all friendship, the absurdity of all effort, and could hardly persuade himself to get up and face a futile world, which had, moreover, the enormous disadvantage for the moment of being a new one.[13]

Langham's agonizing mental machinations mirror the description of the *Divine Comedy's* pilgrim who, beset by fear in the dark wood becomes like one who "unwills what he wills,/ changing his plan for every little thought,/ till he withdraws from any kind of start."[14] Mrs. Humphry Ward effects a similar theme in the character of Langham, as he varies between night and day, happiness and misery, yes and no. As Dante, so does Langham "turn [his] mind on that dark verge,/ for thinking ate away the enterprise/ so prompt in the beginning to set forth."[15] We see that Langham's long nurtured fear of failure negates his undeniably passionate love for Rose. He cannot climb

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[12]Ward, 172.

[13]Ward, 172.

[14]*Inferno* Canto II, ll. 37-39.

[15]*Inferno* Canto II, ll. 40-43.

that “hill that brings delight” which leads to happiness and fulfillment because his spirit truly is “bruised by cowardice,/Which many a time so weighs a man’s heart down/ it turns him from a glorious enterprise-/ as shadows fool the horse that shies away.”[16]

Our first substantial hint of the evolution of Langham’s soul as it is softened by his feelings for Rose is evident in the shift in his view of Catherine (Rose’s softening character is similarly revealed). As expected, Langham views Catherine as a poor match for his bright protégée. Her so-called antecedents and mystical nature are foreign to the Oxford trained intellectual and he regrets Robert’s falling under her domesticating spell. However, as his relationship with Rose breaks into his mental and emotional hermitage, we see a shift:

> Long before the little party separated for the night, Langham had given it up, and had betaken himself to Catherine, reminding himself with some sharpness that he had come down to study his friend's life, rather than the humors of a provoking girl. How still the summer night was round the isolated rectory; how fresh and spotless were all the appointments of the house; what a Quaker neatness and refinement everywhere! He drank in the scent of air and flowers with which the rooms were filled; for the first time his fastidious sense was pleasantly conscious of Catherine's grave beauty; and even the mystic ceremonies of family prayer had a certain charm for him, pagan as he was. How much dignity and persuasiveness it has still he thought to himself, this commonplace country life of ours, on its best sides![17]

Robert’s homely country life has gone from something to be despised to something to be envied in a matter of days as Langham’s original, hopeful self threatens to emerge from behind the dark curtain of perpetual skepticism. Similarly, his perception of Robert and Robert’s eternal optimism undergoes a transformation. Upon hearing Robert speak to his country charges in his newly established reading club, Langham “not only endured,

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[16]*Inferno* Canto II, ll. 45-48.

[17]Ward, 168-169.

but enjoyed" what he heard. He is deeply impressed with Robert's charisma and energy, especially considering the active life he leads outside of the pulpit. As Robert relates the story of Richard the Lion Hearted, Langham takes notice of the spiritual power the rector displays.

> As he read on, his arms resting on the high desk in front of him, and his eyes, full of infectious enjoyment, travelling from the book to his audience, surrounded by human beings whose confidence he had won, and whose lives he was brightening from day to day, he seemed to Langham the very type and model of a man who had found his *metier*, found his niche in the world, and the best means of filling it. If to attain to an 'adequate and masterly expression of oneself' be the aim of life, Robert was achieving it. This parish of twelve hundred souls gave him now all the scope he asked. It was evident that he felt his work to be rather above than below his deserts. He was content--more than content to spend ability which would have distinguished him in public life, or carried him far to the front in literature, on the civilizing a few hundred of England's rural poor. The future might bring him worldly success--Langham thought it must and would. Clergymen of Robert's stamp are rare among us. But if so, it would be in response to no conscious effort of his. Here, in the country living he had so long dreaded and put from him, less it should tax his young energies too lightly, he was happy--deeply, abundantly happy, at peace with God, at one with man.[18]

This narration, though seemingly concerned with Robert, perhaps speak more to the character of Langham as his thoughts continue:

> *Happy!* Langham, sitting at the outer corner of one of the benches, by the open door, gradually ceased to listen, started on other lines of thought by this realization, warm, stimulating, provocative, of another man's happiness.[19]

Previous to his infatuation with Rose, Langham never could have sympathized with another man's happiness, much less be led by the thought of it into hopes for his own. However, we see in this and in similar scenes, almost immediately after meeting Rose,

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[18]Ward, 181.

[19]Ward, 182.

Langham's perception of the domestic life undergoes a major alteration, changing from something to be shunned, to something to be embraced.

Unfortunately, Langham remains consistent in his ever-changing moods. We soon find the hopefulness dissipating into melancholy as the passage continues:

> Outside, the shadows lengthened across the green; groups of distant children or animals passed in and out of the golden light spaces; the patches of heather left here and here glowed as the sunset touched them. Every now and then his eye travelled vaguely past a cottage garden, gay with the pinks and carmines of the phloxes, into the cool browns and bluish-greys of the raftered room beyond; babies toddled across the road, with stooping mothers in their train; the whole air and scene seemed to be suffused with suggestions of the pathetic expansiveness and helplessness of human existence, which generation after generation, is still so vulnerable, so confiding, so eager. Life after life flowers out from the darkness and sinks back into it again. And in the interval what agony, what disillusion! All the apparatus of a universe that men may know what it is to hope and fail, to win and lose! *Happy!*--in this world, 'where men sit and hear each other groan.' His friend's confidence only made Langham as melancholy as Job.[20]

This vital passage concludes with Ward's reassertion of the tension between Langham's vacillating moods as the "usual reaction of his afternoon self against his morning self" turned his near epiphanic joy into a "longing for something purely mundane."[21]

These instances reveal that it is not merely love of woman that beckons Langham to a different life, but love in general; although his interactions with Rose provide the strongest impetus for change, mere human relation and domestic life also pull at Langham's spirit.

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[20]Ward, 182.

[21]Ward, 182.

The pitiful wavering of the Murewell scenes between Langham's "morning self" and "afternoon self" reaches perhaps its most agonizing point as the love affair's heights and depths are contained in one gripping exchange. The musical scene portrayed at the Squire's dinner party reflects the best that we will see of Edward Langham. Accompanying Rose, the two are as united as they will ever be, speaking in musical language what words could not express. Ward paints what one critic describes as the central seduction scene.[22] It is possible for this pivotal scene to be described through the eyes of Rose, as the two are in complete sync for this frozen moment.

> So they plunged again into an Andante and Scherzo of Beethoven. How the girl threw herself into it, bringing out the wailing love-song of the Andante, the dainty tripping mirth of the Scherzo, in a way which set every nerve in Langham vibrating! Yet the art of it was wholly unconscious. The music was the mere natural voice of her inmost self. A comparison full of excitement was going on in that self between her first impressions of the man beside her, and her consciousness of him, as he seemed to-night human, sympathetic, kind. A blissful sense of a mission filled the young silly soul. Like David, she was pitting herself and her gift against those dark powers which may invade and paralyze a life.
> […], Langham turned to his companion,--
> 'Do you know that for years I have enjoyed nothing so much as the music of the last two days?'
> His black eyes shone upon her, transfused with something infinitely soft and friendly. She smiled. 'How little I imagined that first evening that you cared for music!'
> 'Or about anything else worth caring for?' he asked her.[23]

We see here a Langham of hope and promise, the dreamer of his youth reemerging. However, the bliss is short-lived as the musical revelry turns to a dark reflection on the disparities of the union.

> Suddenly a sense of the difference between the week behind him, with all its ups and downs, its quarrels, its *ennuis*, its moments of delightful

[22]Peterson, 125.

[23]Ward, 239.

> intimity, of artistic freedom and pleasure, and those threadbare, monotonous weeks into which he was to slip back on the morrow, awoke in him a mad inconsequent sting of disgust, of self-pity.
> 'No, we shall finish nothing,' he said in a voice which only she could hear, his hands lying on the keys; 'there are some whose destiny it is never to finish--never to have enough--to leave the feast on the tables and all the edges of life ragged!'[24]

Here Langham is reaffirming his choice to commit a living suicide as he refuses the goodness of life in favor of comfortable self-pity. In Rose's response we see not only a refusal of Langham's philosophy, but also an unconscious prophecy of her lover's future.

> 'We make our own destiny,' she said impatiently. '*We* choose. It is all our own doing. Perhaps destiny begins things--friendship, for instance; but afterward it is absurd to talk of anything but ourselves. We keep our friends, our chances, our--our joys,' she went on hurriedly, trying desperately to generalize, 'or we throw them away willfully, because we choose.'[25]

Thus far, Langham has played the role of both guide and pilgrim. With his final act of denial, he takes on the role of the damned. The *selva oscura* of the opening canto is not the final dark wood Dante will encounter. In fact, this image is found again in Canto VII, the circle of the suicides. Dante describes this layer of hell thusly:

> […] when we had made our way into a wood,/place unmarked by any kind of path./ its leaves not green, but dingy and dull black;/ no slender limbs, but hunched with knots and gnarls;/ no hanging fruit, but stickes and poisonous thorns[26]

While the original *selva oscura* was certainly dark and confusing, it was not hopeless. In fact, at the end of the opening canto we are reminded that God's Love illuminates even such a dark moment as the pilgrim recognizes the moon which is "clad in the rays of the

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[24]Ward, 240.

[25]Ward, 240.

[26]*Inferno* Canto XIII, ll. 2-6.

planet that leads every man aright."[27] This wood of the suicides, however, shows no such hope. The *selva oscura* of the opening Canto presented the pilgrim with a choice, the wood of the suicides is the result of giving in to fear and despair.

Although Langham does not physically take his own life, Ward distinctly connects him with suicide throughout the novel. The more abstract ideas of shutting out the world and giving up on all natural ambition certainly pave the way for this idea. In his first visit to the home of the Squire, a figure with whom the young man has much in common, the issue of suicide is first explicitly addressed. Wandering through the library with Elsmere, marveling over the magnificent collection and the years of learning it represents, the issue of the Squire's haunting family history is broached. We learn, along with Langham, that two decades before, in that very library, the Squire's father had "put an end to himself." Although superficially Langham brushes over the incident, internally he is deeply moved by the "skeleton in this magnificent cupboard."[28]

> 'So this is where that old man ventured "what Cato did and Addison approved," murmured Langham, standing in the middle of the room and looking around him. This particular room was now used as a sort of lumber place, a receptacle for the superfluous or useless books, gradually thrown off by the great collection all around. There were innumerable volumes in frayed or broken bindings lying on the ground. A musty smell hung over it all; the grey light from outside, which seemed to give only an added subtlety and charm, to the other portions of the ancient building through which they had been moving, seemed here *triste* and dreary. Or Langham fancied it.
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> He passed the threshold again with a little sigh, and saw suddenly before him at the end of the suite of rooms, and framed in the doorways facing him, an engraving of a Greuze picture--a girl's face turned over her shoulder, the hair waving about her temples, the lips parted, the teeth gleaming mirth and provocation and tender yielding in every line.

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[27] *Inferno*

[28] Ward, 194.

> Langham started, and the blood rushed to his heart. It was as though Rose herself stood there and beckoned to him.[29]

This vision of the beckoning Rose solidifies Ward's link between the act of suicide and the spiritual death in life. We see here that Langham is faced with a definitive choice: a choice between a life spent journeying toward fulfillment, enabled and inspired by love, or a life turned in upon oneself, a parasitic existence that refuses its ultimate end.

Langham's eerie vision is expressed in his conversation with Rose extolling the virtues of the mental life over the social:

> 'And then--' he went on presently (but was the strange being speaking to her?)--'so long as I stay there, worrying those about me, and eating my own heart out, I am out off from the only life that might be mine, that I might find the strength to live.'
> The words were low and deliberate. After his moment of passionate speech, and hers of passionate sympathy, she began to feel strangely remote from him.
> 'Do you mean the life of the student?' she asked him after a pause, timidly. Her voice recalled him. He turned and smiled at her.
> 'Of the dreamer, rather.'
> And as her eyes still questioned, as he was still moved by the spell of her responsiveness, he let the new wave of feeling break in words. Vaguely at first, and then with a growing flame and force he fell to describing to her what the life of thought may be to the thinker, and those marvellous moments which belong to that life when the mind which has divorced itself from desire and sense sees spread out before it the vast realms of knowledge, and feels itself close to the secret springs and sources of being. And as he spoke, his language took an ampler turn, the element of smallness which attaches to all more personal complaint vanished, his words flowed, became eloquent, inspired--till the bewildered child beside him, warm through and through as she was with youth and passion, felt for an instant by sheer fascinated sympathy the cold spell, the ineffable prestige, of the thinker's voluntary death in life.
> But only, for an instant. Then the natural sense of chill smote her to the heart.
> 'You make me shiver,' she cried, interrupting him. 'Have those strange things--I don't understand them--made you happy? Can they make anyone happy? Oh no, no! Happiness is to be got from living, seeing, experiencing, making friends, enjoying nature! Look at the world, Mr.

[29]Ward, 199-200.

> Langham!' she, said with bright cheeks, half smiling at her own magniloquence, her hand waving over the view before them. 'What has it done that you should hate it so? If you can't put up with people you might love nature. I--I can't be content with nature, because I want some life first. Up in Whindale there is too much nature, not enough life. But if I had got through life--if it had disappointed me--then I should love nature. I keep saying to the mountains at home: "Not now, not now; I want something else, but afterward if I can't get it, or if I get too much of it, why then I will love you, live with you. You are my second string, my reserve. You--and art--and poetry."'[30]

The distinction between these two world-views is the distinction between the life and death of the soul. Langham's only hope is to follow the beckoning image of love, just as Dante is led by Beatrice into the beatific vision. Unfortunately, after Murewell, Langham distances himself from this hope even further. Although, upon meeting in London, the romance between the two is rekindled and even brought to perhaps its highest pitch in the proposal scene, the London activities, in reality, are only an extension of the habits and patterns presented in the other chapters; the only difference is that the stakes have been raised even higher and London represents finality.

In the feverish proposal scene, we witness a Langham pushed to decision by outside forces. Remaining true to his diffident nature, he never could have brought himself to such a moment out of sheer force of will; instead, he is forced into it by his sanguine rival, Hugh Flaxman. Guided by a mixture of morbid curiosity and generous goodwill, Flaxman pushes Langham and Rose to a public scene, by which he hopes to judge the level of their affection. Having satisfied himself that the two are, in fact, in love, Flaxman provides the prime opportunity for Langham to close the deal around which the pair has been dancing since the day they met. Finding himself alone with his beloved on the dark streets of London, Langham still cannot bring himself to grasp the happiness

[30]Ward, 218-219.

offered to him. It is Rose who takes command of the profession of love, Rose who perversely proposes to herself. In Langham's wretched wavering, we see a mirror of things only hinted at during their final talks at Murewell. When asked if he is finally sure, something he could never really be, Langham replies:

> 'Oh, hush,' he said, and his voice was full of pain. 'You know so little; let me paint myself. I have lived alone, for myself, in myself, till sometimes there seems to be hardly anything left in me to love or be loved; nothing but a brain, a machine that exists only for certain selfish ends. My habits are the tyrants of years; and at Murewell, though I loved you there, they were strong enough to carry me away from you. There is something paralyzing in me, which is always forbidding me to feel, to will. Sometimes I think it is an actual physical disability--the horror that is in me of change, of movement, of effort. Can you bear with me? Can you be poor? Can you live a life of monotony? Oh, impossible!' he broke out, almost putting her hand away from him. 'You, who ought to be a queen of this world, for whom everything bright and brilliant is waiting if you will but stretch out your hand to it. It is a crime--an infamy--that I should be speaking to you like this!'[31]

Langham speaks of a fated paralysis, a myth Rose earlier dispelled in her insistence on choice and free will. Here, the choice to love is offered yet again as she pleads with him that love will break the cycle of stagnation. This pleading leads to Langham's purest emotional connection as

> The soft words flew through his blood. For an instant he felt himself saved, like Faust,--saved by the surpassing moral beauty of one moment's impression. That she should need him, that his life should matter to hers! They were passing the garden wall of a great house. In the deepest shadow of it, he stooped suddenly and kissed her.[32]

The scene that follows is perhaps the most gripping and compelling of the entire novel. In his soul's final struggle for life, we witness Langham at his most tortured and complex. Just hours after his blissful betrothal, Langham's wavering, doubtful,

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[31]Ward, 447.

[32]Ward, 448.

agonizing nature returns. Again, he blames a conscienceless Fate for allowing the "poor, silent, insignificant student" to win out over the "successful man of the world." Alone in his London rooms, he miserably recognizes that the "great moment," the "supreme experience" of life had come and gone and he is relatively unchanged. Even "fresh from Rose's kiss, from Rose's beauty, the strange maimed soul falls to a pitiless analysis of his passion, her response! One moment he is at her feet in a voiceless trance of gratitude and tenderness; the next--is nothing what it promises to be?--and has the boon already, now that he has it in his grasp, lost some of its beauty?"[33]

The ensuing hours prove to be the "dialogue which was to decide his life;" the ultimate and final choice between life and death.

> 'But I love her!--I love her! A little courage--a little effort--and I too can achieve what other men achieve. I have gifts, great gifts. Mere contact with her, the mere necessities of the situation, will drive me back to life, teach me how to live normally, like other men. I have not forced her love--it has been a free gift. Who can blame me if I take it, if I cling to it, as the man freezing in a crevasse clutches the rope thrown to him?'
> To which the pale spectre self said scornfully--
> 'Courage and effort may as well be dropped out of your vocabulary. They are words that you have no use for. Replace them by two others--.habit and character. Slave as you are of habit, of the character you have woven for yourself--out of years of deliberate living--what wild unreason to imagine that love can unmake, can re-create! What you are, you are to all eternity. Bear your own burden, but for God's sake beguile no other human creature into trusting you with theirs!'
> 'But she loves me! Impossible that I should crush and tear so kind, so warm a heart! Poor child--poor child! I have played on her pity. I have won all she had to give. And now to throw her gift back in her face--oh monstrous--oh inhuman!' and the cold drops stood on his forhead.
> But the other self was inexorable. 'You have acted as you were bound to act--as any man may be expected to act in whom will and manhood and true human kindness are dying out, poisoned by despair and the tyranny of the critical habit. But at least do not add another crime to the first. What in God's name have you to offer a creature of such claims, such ambitions?

[33]Ward, 449.

> You are poor--you must go back to Oxford--you must take up the work your soul loathes--grow more soured, more embittered--maintain a useless degrading struggle, till her youth is done, her beauty wasted, and till you yourself have lost every shred of decency and dignity, even that decorous outward life in which you can still wrap yourself from the world! Think of the little house--the children--the money difficulties--she, spiritually starved, every illusion gone,--you incapable soon of love, incapable even of pity, conscious only of a dull rage with her, yourself, the world! Bow the neck--submit--refuse that long agony for yourself and her, while there is still time. Kismet!--Kismet!'[34]

As in the *Divine Comedy*, the sinner has become his sin. The fear which once impeded his journey, has now become a perverse satisfaction, despair his closest friend. In the end, "the spectre self, cold and bloodless conqueror, slipped back into the soul which remorse and terror, love and pity, a last impulse of hope, a last stirring of manhood, had been alike powerless to save."[35] Langham becomes the embodiment of despair and with his final letter to Rose, divorces from life altogether. In perhaps the most poignant scene of the book, Mrs. Humphry Ward cements her idea of spiritual suicide as a parallel to the physical. Returning from the delivery of his letter, Langham

> On his way back he passed a gunsmith's, and stood looking fascinated at the shining barrels. Then he moved away, shaking his head, his eyes gleaming as though the spectacle of himself had long ago passed the bounds of tragedy--become farcical even.
> 'I should only stand a month--arguing--with my finger on the trigger.'[36]

Immediately he begins packing for Oxford, the final symbol of his withdrawal from life. In his parting scene with Robert we see the irrevocable damage done to Langham's fragile soul by his refusal of hope. The death imagery is repeated as Robert wonders if

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[34]Ward, 449-450.

[35]Ward, 450.

[36]Ward, 450.

Langham's miserable explanations are the final words of his life. Physically, the beautiful tutor's face has become but a marble mask, devoid of all life and warmth.

The resulting death of Langham's soul is most vividly seen when compared to its affect on Rose. When her betrayer confronts her, she is upset and angry, but her reaction settles into something much nobler. When Langham pleads for her to understand she responds,

> 'I think I do,' she said with a change of tone, and paused. He raised his eyes involuntarily, met hers, and stood bewildered. What was the expression in them? It was yearning--but not the yearning of passion. 'If things had been different--if one could change the self--if the past were nobler!--was that the cry of them? A painful humility--a boundless pity--the rise of some moral wave within her he could neither measure nor explain--these were some of the impressions which passed from her to him. A fresh gulf opened between them, and he saw her transformed on the farther side, with, as it were, a loftier gesture, a nobler stature, than had ever yet been hers.[37]

Rose is able to recognize the agony of Langham's situation. Her response to pain and doubt is starkly different from her lover's fatalistic pessimism.

> And from the whole long struggle--passion, exultation, and crushing defeat--it often seemed to her that she had gained neither joy nor irreparable grief, but a new birth of character, a soul![38]

Rose has learned the power of redemptive suffering and of sacrificial love. Her old selfishness has been replaced with humility and sympathy because of her choice to love even in the face of pain and fear. Rose's pilgrimage follows the way of life and her character gains depth and texture.

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[37]Ward, 459.

[38]Ward, 464.

Langham's final appearance in the novel comes with Robert's return to Oxford for the funeral of Henry Grey. Here he learns that Langham's reclusive ways detach him from all society; his old sympathetic relations even with Robert have turned cold and lifeless. Tellingly, Langham does not appear at the deathbed of his closest friend. We see once and for all that by denying his chance at love, Langham, just as Rose unwittingly predicted, chooses despair. He has chosen a sort of suicidal paralysis that allows a despairing fear to rule instead of a freeing love; he is a slave to his own sin. Just as Dante's suicides have given up on their ultimate end and committed the ultimate selfish act, Langham similarly chooses to remain rooted in misery as Vergil asks again, "But you, why do you turn back to such pain?/ Why don't you climb that hill that brings delight,/ the origin and cause of every joy?"[39]

Disdainful and Scowling

In spite of his fatigue there woke in him a kind of cruel whimsical pleasure at the notion of speaking, once for all, what he conceived to be the whole bare truth to this clever, attractive dreamer, to the young fellow who thought he could condescend to science from the standpoint of the Christian miracles![40]

…….

Who's that huge one who doesn't seem to mind
the fire, but lies and twists his face for spite,
so that the rains don't seem to ripen him?[41]

Bordering the edge of Dante's "woeful wood," where the souls of the suicides remain forever bodyless, we find the miserable souls of those who have sinned against God, the worst of which are the blasphemers. Eternally supine, their faces turn to heaven in death

[39]*Inferno* Canto I, ll. 76-78.

[40]Ward, 316.

[41]*Inferno* Canto XIV, ll. 46-48.

as they did in life, cursing God as the rain of fire chokes their cries.[42] In Ward's scheme, Langham remains trapped in a life of paralyzed negation. However, just as Dante passes from one realm to the other, Robert is led next to the guidance of Squire Wendover, a man whose desperation takes on a much more malicious form. While Robert and Langham both represent pilgrims relatively young in their respective journeys, the Squire, due to Langham's youth and Robert's early death, is the only illustration of the natural end. But what kind of end does he represent? If Langham returns his ticket in the wood of the suicides, where does the Squire's soul fit into the Dantesque scheme? We see in the Squire, the paralysis of the young, pitiful Langham transformed into a malice that no longer wavers between the positive and negative, but defies the good to encroach upon his bitter existence and embraces denial with gusto. In order, then, to better understand Robert, we must understand the different impact these two guides perform on his soul.

As a guide, Langham held mainly intellectual sway over his erstwhile pupil, infringing little on Robert's religious beliefs. In his own journey, Langham chooses the intellectual over the spiritual or emotional, resigning himself to a life of cold rationality. For Ward, this represents a perversion of the intellect; she was horrified by the fact that the scholar "could become a mere parasite whose reading offered him an escape from life."[43] If Langham is the typified skeptic, in the Squire, we see what could be argued as an aged Langham, the scholar who has cut himself off from human contact, presumably for the sake of his scholarship, but in reality, due to his fear and defiance. Convinced that

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[42]Charles Singleton, *Inferno: Commentary* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1970).

[43]Peterson, 81.

"the pursuit of knowledge without reference to moral considerations was ultimately self-destructive," Ward presents the Squire as the ultimate end to which an untempered intellect could lead.[44] By pairing him with the younger tutor, she depicts the perils Robert, and all spiritual pilgrims face, should they turn from the path of truth.

While many of Langham's intellectual and social idiosyncrasies are reflected in the Squire, Ward links the two characters irrefutably with a single word: *testimony*. Langham, again lighting Robert's spiritual path, first introduces his friend to what he calls "almost the chief interest of history" within the haunted halls of the Squire's library. Wandering distractedly among the varied titles, it is as if the two young men are wandering through the labyrinth-like pathways of the Squire's accomplished mind. The course of study that has, over time, shaped the man, intoxicates their Oxford trained minds and imbues their conversation with a sort of awe for the intellectual power represented there. Langham tells Robert that

> History depends on testimony.What is the nature and the value of testimony at given times? In other words, did the man of the third century understand or report, or interpret facts in the same way as the man of the sixteenth or the nineteenth? And if not, what are the differences, and what are the deductions to be made from them, if any?'[45]

Robert responds with assurances that, now that he is free to determine his own intellectual path, he will explore the question further, the question on which, Langham claims, the whole of orthodox Christianity hinges. Robert's pretences toward intellectual freedom are somewhat misguided as he will soon find himself under the influence of yet another guide who will provide him with "second hand" versions of historical fact.

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[44]Peterson, 81.

[45]Ward, 199.

This notion of testimony that Langham holds so dear returns later in the narrative; however, it is no longer Langham's pet project, but the Squire's. The exchange cements the connection between the Squire and the Oxford tutor, both for the reader and for Robert:

> Elsmere's eyes were still interrogative. 'Oh, well,' said the Squire, hastily, 'it is a book I planned just after I took my Doctor's degree at Berlin. It struck me then as the great want of modern scholarship. It is a History of Evidence, or rather, more strictly, "A History of Testimony."'
> Robert started. The library flashed into his mind, and Langham's figure in the long grey coat sitting on the stool.
> 'A great subject,' he said slowly, 'a magnificent subject .How have you conceived it I wonder?'[46]

In the subsequent discussion, the Squire will further develop this shared idea of testimony and make inroads into Robert's soul in ways that Langham was never able to. This exchange allows us to see how tightly the characters of Langham and the Squire are interwoven, we will return later to determine how the passage also marks their divergence.

It is not only professional pursuits that link Langham and the Squire, but also the overwhelming and stifling weight of suicide. It is in the Squire's library and the halls of his home that the suicide imagery is first introduced and his family history sets the motif in motion. Old Meyrick warms Robert's heart toward his landlord with the story of the deep suffering and misery of the Squire's younger days when, upon the occasion of his father's suicide, the young heir suffered a physical and mental breakdown. We are told he was "the only witness of that dark consciousness of inherited fatality which at that

[46]Ward, 314.

period of his life not even the Squire's iron will had been able wholly to conceal." [47] This soul sickness, and notably mind sickness,[48] to which Meyrick refers, have resulted in the Squire's denial of the good. Meyrick reluctantly paints the portrait of a blasphemer as he goes on to assess the current state of the Squire's soul.

> Ah! It's no good talking; he has a heart--he has! Many's the kind thing he's done in old days for me and mine--I'll never forget them! But all these last few years--oh, I know, I know. Yon can't go and shut your heart up, and fly in the face of all the duties the Lord laid on you, without losing yourself and setting the Lord against you. But it is pitiful, Mr. Elsmere, it's pitiful![49]

Meyrick pities the plight of a man who, like Langham, first passively detached himself from human community, but then goes on to actively defy the faith and edicts of God. This juxtaposition of the two guides allows Ward to skillfully expose the true nature of the human pilgrimage in which we all have roles to play; it is in the soul's reaction to suffering and the *selva oscura* that the choice between salvation and damnation is made. Just as Dante's sins are embodied in concrete figures, her characters provide snapshots of the soul on its path, or off of its path, toward fulfillment in Christ.

As Dante, Robert, and Langham have all illustrated, the soul of man undergoes a period of spiritual struggle that often involves a painful redefinition of the pilgrim's worldview. As Augustine wrote, it is essential that the soul descend, so that it may ascend. While our other journeyers' spiritual agonies are outlined for us, we see this guide with only a backwards glancing reference to his own dark night; however, we are

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[47]Ward, 289.

[48]Notice the mania is at its peak in the library, symbolizing the ultimate surrender to the life of the mind at the cost of everything else.

[49]Ward, 290.

able to fill in much of the Squire's history to gain insight into his character, specifically by examining his real-life precedent.

If Langham is a creation loosely based on the influence of Pater, Squire Wendover is the literary embodiment of another key figure of his author's life. Ward's Oxford days were spent much under the influence of Mark Pattison. Pattison was known for his penchant for bright young females, and Mary Arnold certainly intrigued him as such. Previous to her marriage, the young and eager scholar was greatly attracted to Pattison's intelligence and scholarly esteem. She allowed herself to be academically and professionally guided by him, as well as to carry on a close personal friendship. Over time, however, the relationship cooled as Pattison began to distance himself further and further from the Church. Ward could not help but note that Pattison's brilliant intellect was the extent of his attraction. One historian remarks that "Despite her great affection for Pattison, Ward could not ignore the fact that his negations had produced little but personal unhappiness." Despite her increasingly heterodox opinions, Ward longed for reformation from within the Church, and Pattison's relationship with it became increasingly antagonistic. Thus the "barren skepticism" of a man who claimed to "have really no history but a mental history" provides the seed of Mrs. Humphry Ward's insistence on the dangers of a life lived only for dry scholarship. Pattison's memoirs reveal that

> In his postgraduate youth he had been a Newmanite; but religion now held nothing for him and he saw the fifteen years of the Tractarian Movement as a dark age. Nor did the trappings of university power lure him, ever since he had been disappointed in his first bid for the Lincoln rectorship in 1851 by one turncoat Fellow's vote.[50]

[50]Sutherland, 33.

His professional disappointments, much like those of Edward Langham, produced a

> "blank, dumb, despair" which wholly altered the course of his later life. Since 1851, (the year of Mary's birth) he had "lived wholly for study." Over the years he had resolutely promoted a cult of modern, hard, Germanic research. This was the mission to which he dedicated his college against the High Church conventionalities of Christ Church and the vocationalism of Balliol –one of which he despised and the other of which he thought misguided. His views were not mellowed by his eventually winning the longed-for rectorship of his college in 1861.[51]

While we are privy only to fleeting allusions to the Squire's history, the clues which we are provided speak to a similar disillusionment. Experiencing the academic and theological revolution of the Oxford Movement and its aftermath, we know that the Squire's one-time dedication to Newman had transformed into a bitter hatred. He mirrors Pattison's real-life sentiments which hailed the collapse of the Oxford Movement, occasioned by Newman's conversion to Rome in 1845, as "a deliverance from the nightmare which had oppressed Oxford for fifteen years."[52] This new (and perhaps reactionary) mood of rationalism led to the publication of *Essays and Reviews* which, according to Peterson, "stank of heresy in the nostrils of the orthodox."[53] Fictionally, the Squire answers this with his best-selling *Idols of the Marketplace* which fixes him for Robert, as an intellectual force to be reckoned with and as a representative of the hard lined atheism resultant from the Victorian encounters with Doubt.

To return here to our distinction between the two influential figures of Langham and the Squire, it is interesting to note that, for Robert, the difference is that the elder is a man of action, whereas the younger, as we know, is a man of inaction. Robert recognizes the

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[51]Pattison qtd. in Sutherland, 33.

[52]Pattison qtd. in Peterson, 62.

[53]Peterson, 62.

publication of *Idols of the Marketplace* and the generations of other works as proof of the Squire's productivity, while he doubts Langham's books in progress are anything more than a professional ruse. This view is solidified in Langham's treatment of the all-important question of testimony as merely an interesting theory, versus the Squire's major work on the subject. This speaks again to their spiritual status, as Langham's soul is damned by its inaction and the Squire's by its forceful action. We may wonder why, with such similar histories and interests, the two vary so distinctly in this area. The answer may be generational. The crucial and formative Oxford days, for the Squire, were rife with controversy and change, while Langham is merely a product of the resulting disillusionment.

Having so tightly linked the two guides, making them almost snapshots of each other (and of Robert) at different points in the pilgrimage, Ward invites us to question the difference in their resulting impact on Robert. Whereas Langham certainly provided academic training and perhaps paved the way for future intellectual pursuits, he was largely ineffective in influencing Robert's soul, nor did he desire to do so. The Squire, however, is eventually allowed, even to some degree invited, into Robert's innermost deliberations. Returning to the varying discussions of testimony, this difference is illustrated. While he repays Langham's insight with a presumptive dismissal, by the time the question arises with the Squire, he responds quite differently. From where we previously left off, the conversation continues:

> 'Simply from the standpoint of evolution, of development. The philosophical value of the subject is enormous. You must have considered it, of course; every historian must. But few people have any idea in detail of the amount of light which the history of human witness in the world,

> systematically carried through, throws on the history of the human mind; that is to say, on the history of ideas.'
> The Squire paused, his keen scrutinizing look dwelling on the face beside him, as though to judge whether he were understood.
> 'Oh, true!' cried Elsmere; 'most true. Now I know what vague want it is that has been haunting me for months----'
> He stopped short, his look, aglow with all the young thinker's ardor fixed on the Squire.
> The Squire received the outburst in silence--a somewhat ambiguous silence.
> 'But go on,' said Elsmere; 'please go on.'[54]

For months, the Squire has been priming the young rector for this moment, and thus prepared, it is Robert who invites the seeds of doubt to enter his mind. The Squire goes on to describe his break from orthodoxy from an intellectual perspective and spins a tale so convincing, “Elsmere turned to him with wonder, with a movement of irrepressible homage.”

Elsmere’s one-time repulsion for the Squire and the atheistical negations he represents, has transformed into a sort of intellectual hero-worship and in the ensuing paragraphs, his armor does not fall off, but is willfully shed.

> Elsmere was silent, thinking this then was the explanation of the Squire's minute and exhaustive knowledge of the early Christian centuries, a knowledge into which--apart from certain forbidden topics-he had himself dipped so freely. Suddenly, as he mused, there awoke in the young man a new hunger, a new unmanageable impulse toward frankness of speech. All his nascent intellectual powers were alive and clamorous. For the moment his past reticences and timidities looked to him absurd. The mind rebelled against the barriers it had been rearing against itself. It rushed on to sweep them away, crying out that all this shrinking from free discussion had been at bottom 'a mere treason to faith.'
> 'Naturally, Mr. Wendover,' he said at last, and his tone had a half-defiant, half-nervous energy, 'you have given your best attention all these years to the Christian problems.'

[54]Ward, 314

> 'Naturally,' said the Squire dryly. Then, as his companion still seemed to wait, keenly expectant, he resumed, with something cynical in the smile which accompanied the words,--
> 'But I have no wish to infringe our convention.'
> 'A convention was it?' replied Elsmere flushing. 'I think I only wanted to make my own position clear and prevent misunderstanding. But it is impossible that I should be indifferent to the results of thirty years' such work as you can give to so great a subject.'[55]

Here Robert lets down his guard, or perhaps here his guard is revealed to have been let down long before. Similar to his dealings with Langham, Robert had made a sort of pact with the Squire early on to respect each other's space on issues of religion. Here it is revealed as a mere formality, easily shed when the intellect is teased with new and exciting information. It is in the following description that the true nature of the guide/wayfarer relationship is revealed.

> The Squire drew himself up a little under his cloak and seemed to consider. His tired eyes, fixed on the spring lane before them, saw in reality only the long retrospects of the past. Then a light broke in them--a light of battle. He turned to the man beside him, and his sharp look swept over him from head to foot. Well, if he would have it, let him have it. He had been contemptuously content so far to let the subject be. But Mr. Wendover, in spite of his philosophy, had never been proof all his life against an anti-clerical instinct worthy almost of a Paris municipal councillor. In spite of his fatigue there woke in him a kind of cruel whimsical pleasure at the notion of speaking, once for all, what he conceived to be the whole bare truth to this clever, attractive dreamer, to the young fellow who thought he could condescend to science from the standpoint of the Christian miracles![56]

The battle imagery suggested in the Squire's thinking, as well as his relish of Robert's demise have led critics to accuse Ward of allowing her protagonist to passively enter "like a lamb led to slaughter." The criticism, as previously discussed, to a degree, is just. However, it would not be fair to sum up the pair's relationship in just this passage. While

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[55]Ward, 314.

[56]Ward, 315-316.

we see, in this and other instances, the paralysis of Langham juxtaposed against the malice of the Squire, and we cannot deny the impact the Squire's pessimistic skepticism has on Robert's soul, we must still ask, who is guiding whom in this relationship? Who has changed the most by the end of Robert's time at Murewell?

Originally, the Squire viewed Robert as a nonentity, his rectorship a formal position that would hold no bearing on his own life. Then, thanks to his sinister foreman, Henslowe, he perceived Robert as a meddling do-gooder. It was perhaps this early antagonism, mixed with a subsequent fascination with Robert's mental prowess, which led to his desire to twist and crush Robert's naïve worldview in a vise. However, the more time he spends with Robert, the more he is brought into human community, something he has not experienced since the darkness of his youth. He relishes his walks with Robert, first for his malevolent mind games, and later for the companionship and conversation they offered. We see indications of change in his outward actions as well. Once opposed to offering even the most basic of sanitary living conditions to his tenants, under Robert's insistence he improves living conditions immensely, albeit after disease robbed many of their lives. His small steps toward benevolence do not end there, however, but extend even to the sponsorship of a community center meant to promote literacy, community, and charity among the people. It is perhaps symbolic that this gesture, which signifies such a change in the mindset of the Squire, is the last act Robert performs as an orthodox minister of God.

One wonders, had Robert been stronger in his faith, not so easily led astray, would the Squire have been even further softened and humanized? As it happens, Robert's departure from his post (a post intended to guard the Squire's soul), leads to a precipitous

decline in the Squire, both physically and spiritually. His soul sickness returns and he is once again secluded from all community. His spiritually violent death again reveals a man willfully refusing the grace of God. Just as Dante's blasphemers lie cursing God even in death, the Squire passes from this world in a fit of rage, attacking Meyrick, the one man who truly loved him. Gladstone notes that Robert is given something of a free pass in his early death, but in the Squire we see the miserable end of theism divorced from the redemption of Christ.[57]

In a final analysis of the Squire's role as guide, we must again treat the issue of his lasting impact on Robert. In his spiritual upheaval, Robert strives to maintain a moral uprightness and a revised religion that he intends will invigorate his soul rather than stifle it. Does Robert, in his renunciation, escape the fate of the Squire? While Ward goes to great lengths to preserve the heroic morality and integrity of her protagonist, we still must wonder if he is wholly spared from such a fate. His correspondence with Armistead again shows the intersection between guide and pilgrim as he counsels his young replacement via letter. However, does this not place him in the role of the Squire? Sure, his intentions are purer by far, but at the same time, his vehement insistence on his newfound rational spirituality threatens Armistead's simple faith just as the Squire threatened Robert's. It is also, unfortunately, a weakness of the text that Robert feels so thoroughly qualified to offer guidance only months after his soul was wracked to its depths. Here we must question, had Robert not died so young, would he have been saved from the fate of the Squire? Was his early death the easy way out for his author?

[57]Gladstone.

Purged by Fire

Spiritually you have gone through the last wrench, I promise it you! You being what you are, nothing can cut this ground from under your feet.

.....

Holy souls, you pass no farther on
Unless you're bitten by the fire.[58]

While Langham may have held only minimal impact as guide, especially when compared to the cataclysmic effect of the Squire's influence on Robert, the young skeptic is responsible for one crucial aspect of Robert's spiritual development: the introduction of the young pupil to the charismatic Henry Grey. Grey, with whom Langham slips from intimacy into complete despondency across the degeneration of his spiritual life, provides lasting and meaningful spiritual guidance for the wandering Robert. In Grey we find the figure who most closely matches the role of Virgilian guide. As Dante trusts, admires, and even at times seems to worship, his beloved poet, so does Robert revere his mentor. However, despite this natural affinity, there lies a sometimes subtle difference in the worldviews of guide and pilgrim which must be dealt with before the pilgrim can reach his final end; Grey both infuses Robert's life with reason and the glory of the intellect, and also exposes its limitations.

Having treated two types of infernal woods, Dante leads us to another; the "forest thicketed with souls," encountered by the pilgrim and ordinarily inhabited by the guide. Here, in addition to Virgil, we meet such illustrious figures as Homer, Plato, and Socrates. The oft confused pilgrim relies on Virgil to explain that Limbo is a place to which souls are damned, not because of any sin, but because of a lack of faith. To understand Grey's

[58]*Purgatory*, Canto XXVII ll. 10-11

relation to this place, we must treat both its practical effects and its philosophical implications. To do so, we must again, return to Ward's real life models.

The character of Henry Grey, like many others in the novel, represents a conglomeration or *ensemble* as Pater puts it, of men from the author's life.[59] Perhaps the most direct connection, as many critics have noted, is the important figure of Benjamin Jowett. Jowett, unable to maintain a strict orthodox view on the role of miracle, desired to remain within the Church, working to reform it from the inside and lamenting so many liberal defections amongst his colleagues. Like many of his day, Jowett viewed modern advances in Biblical criticism, not as a wholesale refutation of the Church and its teachings, but instead, as an outgrowth of the principles firmly established in the Protestant Reformation.[60] Like Grey, and the later Robert, Jowett "looked forward to a creedless, non-miraculous 'new Christianity" of the future." Peterson goes on to note the disparity between this optimistic viewpoint, in which Christianity is rooted in moral action instead of theological propositions, and that of the embittered Pattison who, we are told, confesses on his deathbed that "the true slavery is that of the 'doers' to the free idle philosopher who lives not to do, or enjoy, but to know." Jowett, like Ward, refutes the idea of knowledge as an end in itself and the distinctions between his character and Pattison's are illustrated in the characters of Grey and Squire Wendover.[61]

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[59]Pater, 58.

[60]Peterson, 76.

[61]Peterson, 76.

In addition to Jowett, Ward found inspiration in the figure of T.H. Green.[62] Green, who also provides a model for the novel's hero, experienced his own painful separation from the Church and Grey's words "The parting with the Christian mythology is the rending asunder of bones and marrow" are actually his.[63] Ward says of Green: "A long intellectual travail had convinced him that the miraculous Christianity was untenable […] but speculatively he gave it up with grief and difficulty and practically, to his last hour, he clung to all the forms and associations of the old belief with a wonderful affection."[64]

The separation from the Church, both of these figures, felt deeply. This sentiment was dear to our author who hoped for a similar reconciliatory mindset to outweigh more reactionary movements within the liberal branch. However, this painful stasis of being caught between two worlds, wears on these men. In Limbo, the pagans are forced to live in perpetual desire but without hope of ever attaining the object of that desire. Similarly, Jowett and others like him are relegated to the margins of Christianity, viewed by both liberals and conservatives alike as anathema.

In addition to the pain of separation being physically imposed, these men are also in a difficult philosophical spot. We must take into account the view of the author, who, like Virgil, cannot see the pitfalls of her own theological position. While Grey and his predecessors express a great hope in the vision of their new, reenergized Christianity, one

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[62]Interestingly, it was an 1881 sermon entitled *Unbelief and Sin*, by the Reverend John Wordsworth which, in part, led to the writing of *Robert Elsmere.*Ward felt the sermon, which claimed unbelief to be the result of a "secret inclination to sin" to be a direct attack on Jowett and Green.Her furiousness led her to write a small pamphlet which followed the careers of two young Oxford students, one of whom embarked on a quest for "a system of religious truth that is tenable in the nineteenth century."This character was a prototype of Robert Elsmere and was meant to prove that unbelief was "a result not of sin but of [his] greater responsiveness to the important intellectual currents of his age."

[63]Green qtd in Peterson, 77.

[64]Ward qtd in Peterson, 77.

has to wonder, what true hope is there in an existence devoid of the supernatural? Ward neglects to fully account for the fact that in Green and Jowett's scheme, as well as in the author's and her hero's, the Christian idea of hope is greatly altered, if not completely excised. While Christians have traditionally placed their hope in the afterlife and in reunification with God through Christ, this humanistic rendering of the Gospel offers no such promise. In this reality, we see Virgil's status as one who lives in perpetual desire, but without hope of fulfillment, in a new light.

In spite of these figures' unfavorable position within Church politics, they were still able to wield great influence over important literary and religious figures such as Gerard Manley Hopkins. Similarly, Grey is a powerful force in the life of Robert. Although his physical presence is more subtle than the other guides in the novel, his impact is never underestimated by the author. In fact, the narrator attributes Grey with playing the "chief role in the transformation" of this young student as he passes from near mediocrity into a devoted passion for the Christian life. It is during one of Grey's lectures that Robert undergoes what most nearly represents a spiritual conversion as described in this passage:

> To the boy sitting among the crowd at the back of the room, his face supported in his hands and his gleaming eyes fixed on the speaker, it seemed as if all the poetry and history through which a restless curiosity and ideality had carried him so far, took a new meaning from this experience. It was by men like this that the moral progress of the world had been shaped and inspired; he felt brought near to the great primal forces breathing through the divine workshop; and in place of natural disposition and reverent compliance, there sprang up in him suddenly an actual burning certainty of belief. "Axioms are not axioms," said poor Keats, "till they have been proved upon our pulses;" and the old familiar figure of the Divine combat, of the struggle in which man and God are one, was proved once more upon a human pulse on that May night, in the hush of that quiet lecture room.[65]

[65]Ward, 59.

Despite Grey's undeniable impact, however, we soon begin to realize a disparity between the student and teacher. We are told "Elsmere […] took in all that Grey had to give, drank in all the ideal fervour, the spiritual enthusiasm of the great tutor, and then, as Grey himself would have done some twenty years earlier, carried his religious passion so stimulated into the service of the great positive tradition around him."[66] This is a tradition of which Grey can no longer take part. Robert's decision to take orders and embark on the life of the clergy, further cements this difference, allowing the disparity to fall like "a veil between them." This subtle lack of correspondence is similarly present in the relationship of Virgil to Dante. Despite Virgil's hero status and his experienced insight exploring the realms of the afterlife, there is often a distance between them, if not emotionally, spiritually.

Grey and Virgil provide their respective charges with the truth offered by the rational mind. If we are to tie Henry Grey to Virgil, we must discuss the role of reason in both Dante's work and Ward's. According to Ward the impetus for T.H. Green's spiritual journey was "the absorbing desire to find ever firmer and firmer bases in the sphere of reason for that faith which governed his every action and affection."[67] We see that desire play out in his literary likeness who encourages Robert to spend one half of every day engaged in intellectual pursuits and is appalled by those who claim God to be incomprehensible, feeling such belief is a disservice to God and man. Whereas the Squire and Langham provide a rational aspect to the narrative, when measured against Grey's

[66]Ward, 62.

[67]Ward qtd. in Peterson, 77.

more balanced view, we see they are representations of perverted reason instead of the purer brand preached by Grey.

However, because of the Dantesque model followed by Ward, as well as her inclusion of such warnings as the figures of Langham and the Squire, we realize that reason alone cannot provide the pilgrim with the tools to complete his journey. The Aristotelian concept of truth as the good of intellect pervades Dante's poem, but it culminates in the vision of God, which is the supreme truth. Reason is necessary, but limited. Virgil, the "light of reason," reveals reasons shortcomings as, over the course of the Comedy his descriptions of the justice of God and the workings of the universe become less and less exact. By the end of the poem, we must revisit even his early explanation of Limbo as Virgil's limited understanding has made even that suspect.

Reason as guide does lead beyond the stagnation of *Inferno* into the growth of *Purgatory*, a journey never made by the damned or by Langham and the Squire; however, reason alone does not lead into the bliss of heaven. Because of these limitations, Virgil leads Dante to the gates of Paradise but cannot accompany him further, leaving him in the hands of Beatrice. We see the same pattern unfold in the life of Robert. Robert's encounter with "*la selva oscura*" leads him to his intellectual idol. It is in the following conversation, a conversation that would prove to be the last between guide and pilgrim, that Grey perfects his Virgilian role. An examination of each pilgrim's final conversation with their respective mentors reveals one of Ward's most striking and subtle parallels.

Atop Mt. Purgatory Dante realizes he cannot continue without passing through a wall of fire. He looks to Virgil for strength and Virgil delivers, saying

> That sweet fruit sought among so many trees/ by mortal men in all their restless care/ today will set your hungry heart at ease."[…] I've led you

> here by strength of mind, and art;/ take your own pleasure for your leader now./ […] No longer wait for what I do or say./ Your judgment now is free and whole and true;/ to fail to follow its will would be to stray./ Lord of yourself I crown and miter you.[68]

At these words of encouragement Dante exclaims "never did New Year's auguries proclaim/ such welcome tidings of felicity."[69]

Ward mirrors this exchange in Elsmere's final meeting with his beloved teacher. Grey encourages Robert in his plight, recognizing the pain and misery but reminding him, "It is the education of God! Do not imagine it will put you further from Him!" He goes on to remind Robert that God uses "man's physical appetites and conditions" as "tools" in his divine work, thus recalling Virgil's discussion of pleasure. Grey also describes the purgation and perfection of will, advising Robert to "think how every faculty of the mind has been trained in turn to take its part in the great work of faith upon the visible world!" He reminds him to trust in love and imagination over reason and, just as Virgil announces Dante's newly perfected will, Grey tells Robert that the "leading strings of the past are dropping from you […]in the providence of God. […] Spiritually you have gone through the last wrench, I promise it you! You being what you are, nothing can cut this ground from under your feet."[70] As Dante treasures Virgil's "auspicious gift," these words will become to Robert "the most precious boon that man can give to man."[71] Both Dante and Robert have, in these scenes, been "born again" through a purgative fire.

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[68]*Purgatory* Canto XXVII ll. 115-118, 130-131, 139-142.

[69]*Purgatory* Canto XXVII ll 119-120.

[70]Ward, 355-357.

[71]Ward, 359.

While Grey's leadership has led Robert to freedom of spirit, his most important role has not yet been mentioned. Just as Robert's relationship with Langham resulted in his intimacy with Grey, Grey guides Robert into the hands of Catherine where his final education will take place.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ultimate End

The Light Between Truth and Intellect

And for both him and Catherine these dark times had moments of intensest joy, points of white light illuminating heaven and earth.

…….

But for so deep a question never rest
unless she gives the answer, who will be
a light of truth to shine upon your mind.[1]

Virgil serves another important purpose in the *Comedy*, just as Grey does in the life of Robert. Each mentor directs the attention of his spiritual charge from his own counsel, to the guidance of the pilgrim's beloved. Virgil spends the first half of Canto XXVII reminding Dante that the wall of fire is all that separates him from his beloved Beatrice. "Now set aside, set aside all your fear-/ turn round this way –be confident, come in. […] Son, look now,/ what's keeping you from Beatrice is this wall.[2] Similarly as the "torch of God passes on its way, hand reaching out to hand," Grey admonishes Robert to talk to his wife, share his burden and seek comfort in her arms.[3] This is not the first link between Catherine and Beatrice, but one in a series that ties the wife to the transformation of temporal love to the eternal love found in the culmination of the spiritual journey. Whether it is passages from her favorite book or the constant ideal of her pure heart, Robert

[1]*Purgatory* Canto VI ll. 43-45.

[2]*Purgatory* Canto XXVII, ll. 31-36.

[3]Ward, 336.

finds guidance in the figure of his wife.[4] In a scene foreshadowing his eventual spiritual crisis, Robert nurses a young labourer through a terrible sickness and his mind is assailed with doubts and questions.

> […] the soul attacked every now and then by phantom stabs of doubt, of bitter brief misgiving, as the barriers of sense between it and the eternal enigma grew more and more transparent, wrestling awhile, and then prevailing. And each golden moment of certainty, of conquering faith, seemed to Robert in some sort a gift from Catherine's hand. It was she who led him through the shades; it was her voice murmuring in his ear.[5]

As is the pattern throughout the novel, it is Catherine beckoning Robert back from the ledge. Even in the anguish of *la selva oscura*, the trees thin and he sees a vision of his wife and home. In agony he cries out "O God! My wife- my work!" realizing what is at stake. In the depths, "There was a sound of a voice calling- Catherine's voice calling for him."[6] Ward does not make little of this connection between romantic love and divine, explicitly stating, "In the most desperate straits of life love is still the fountain of all endurance, and if ever a man loved it was Robert Elsmere."[7] It is in this parallel that Ward's use of Dante breaks down as the poet's traditional and orthodox philosophy edges out Ward's liberal twist; Beatrice's most important role is to guide Dante to the vision of the Incarnate Christ and without this vision the journey would be meaningless and futile. The importance of Catherine's guidance of Robert and her consistent, if hard-fought, success in leading him back to her, results in a much more orthodox rendering of the spiritual pilgrimage than Ward intends.

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[4]Catherine's favorite book, Augustine's *Confessions*, influenced Dante's poem.

[5]Ward, 291-292.

[6]Ward, 343.

[7]Ward, 343.

At the appearance of Beatrice in Canto XXX of *Purgatory*, Dante turns to his guide, ironically to exclaim his perfected knowledge of "the tokens of the ancient flame." However, Dante is surprised to find Virgil is no longer there. Virgil, "in whom [the pilgrim] trusted that [he] might be healed," has disappeared leaving Dante frightened and upset. Beatrice's harsh words for Dante are also applicable to the life of Robert. She rebukes Dante for his tears and commands him to "Look at me well! I'm Beatrice, I am she!/ How did you deign to come upon the hill?/ Didn't you know that man is happy here?"[8]Dante is shamed by the truth of the words, but Beatrice continues:

> "Not by the work of those great wheels alone/ that turn each seed to its perfected end/ to the degree the stars shed friendly light,/ But by the bounteous gifts of divine greace -/whose rain descends from mists of such great height,/ blest eyes themselves cannot approach that place -/ This man was so disposed in his new life/ that every natural habit, turned to good,/ should have been put to wondrous proof in him,/ But when bad seed is sown in a rich field/ or when earth full of vigor lies untilled,/ the thornier and more harmful is its yield."[9]

Robert, too, has taken his eyes off of Catherine and feels ashamed. Beatrice delves even further into the sins of Dante as she reminds him that,

> For a time I sustained him with my sight:/ showing to him my youthful eyes, I led him/ and turned him with me toward the true and right./ But once I stood upon the threshold of/ my second age, exchanging life for life,/ he took himself from me and gave his love/ To someone else. From flesh to spirit I rose/ and found less favor in his eyes, although/ I'd grown more beautiful and virtuous./ He turned his steps along a way not true,/ pursuing the false images of good,/ which promise all and never follow through./ To no avail did I beseech the Lord/ for inspiration, calling him in dreams/ and when he woke-so little did he care!/ So, low he'd fallen then that every means/ to heal his soul ahad been cut short, except/ to show him the lost people. And for this/ I visited the portals of the dead,/ and to the one who led him up this hill/ I offered my entreaties, as I wept.[10]

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[8]*Purgatory*, Canto XXX, ll. 73-75.

[9]*Purgatory*, Canto XXX, ;ll. 109-120.

[10]*Purgatory*, Canto XXX, ll. 121-141.

Having just passed through the misery of separation and the anxiety, the reader along with Dante is rebuked for his complete lack of understanding of the big picture. Mankind is constantly tempted with the tendency to become complacent and satisfied in the temporal without looking toward the spiritual and both Dante and Robert fall into this trap. Each, consciously or no, rejects the divine in favor of the temporary offerings of this life, a reality exemplified in his loss of focus on the ultimate goal; in this scene it is Dante's dependence on Virgil that represents this truth. The same is true of Robert; we see his detachment from Catherine in direct proportion to his over-reliance on other guides. The true extent of this misplaced loyalty is exposed in his relationship with the Squire as Robert is distracted from his once paramount bond in favor of his fascination with the rational world. In reality, Robert is more than distracted; the further he slides into intimacy with the Squire, the more active his neglect and even deceit of his wife becomes. Again we are reminded of the discrepancy between his earlier words, "I dare not think what my future might be without you to guide, to inspire, to bless—I dare not—lest with a word you should plunge me into an outer darkness I cannot face," and his later willingness to hide his books and keep from her the details of his spiritual musings.[11] Robert, to some degree, recognizes his role in this somewhat self-imposed separation and is wracked by guilt. Experiencing the "desolate, intolerable moment" brought on by his reading of the forbidden texts, his soul is overcome by a "dry destroying whirlwind of thought." Still understanding the comfort she represents, Robert's attention is turned back to his wife.

> He stayed bowed there a while, then he roused himself with a half-groan, and hastily extinguishing his lamp; he groped his way upstairs to his wife's room. Catherine lay asleep. The child, lost among its white coverings,

[11]Ward, 143.

> slept too; there was a dim light over the bed, the books, the pictures. Beside his wife's pillow was a table on which there lay open her little Testament and the 'Imitation' her father had given her. Elsmere sank down beside her, appalled by the contrast between this soft religious peace and that black agony of doubt which still overshadowed him. He knelt there, restraining his breath lest it should wake her, wrestling piteously with himself, crying for pardon, for faith, feeling himself utterly unworthy to touch even the dear hand that lay so near him. But gradually the traditional forces of his life reasserted themselves. The horror lifted. Prayer brought comfort and a passionate, healing self-abasement. 'Master, forgive--defend--purify--' cried the aching heart. 'There is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God!'[12]

We are told after that night he never opens the Squire's book again.

Robert realizes his own spiritual immaturity, but does he recognize his own role in the growing distance between husband and wife? The results of this experience suggest no: "And of that night's wrestle he said not a word to any living soul. He did penance for it in the tenderest, most secret ways, but he shrank in misery from the thought of revealing it even to Catherine."[13] Robert's habitual lack of self-awareness and underestimation of his wife's capacity for mercy plagues their relationship, robbing each of counsel and comfort. If Catherine had posed Beatrice's question to her husband,

> "By the desires/ that led your boyhood on to love that Good/ past whom there's nothing to which man aspires,/ What trenches did you meet, what chains or rope/ did you find barring you from passing on,/ that you should have divested all your hope?/ What easy paths and profits shone upon/ the faces of the other goods, that you/ should pass their houses, strolling up and down?" [14]

Robert, mindful of the Squire's influence, could honestly answer with Dante, "Thins go the passing day,/ when once your face was hidden from my sight-/ their lying pleasures

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[12]Ward, 281.

[13]Ward, 281.

[14]*Purgatory*, Canto XXXI, ll. 22-30.

turned my steps away."[15] Throughout the novel, Robert struggles to maintain his focus on Catherine as he is distracted with every new interest that comes his way.

In a subtler and perhaps more dangerous fashion, however, this misplaced reliance also characterizes his relationship with Grey. In the all important *selva oscura* passage, his mind reflexively turns to Catherine, but he proceeds to turn from his wife back to Grey. This format is repeated in Robert's musing on the problem of pain after the birth of his child. He first identifies with his wife's belief that Christ provides "the only clew, the only remedy" to the experience of pain in creation.[16] However, in the ensuing paragraphs his thought shifts from such a stance into a reflection on the history of the church and religion in general. In this pattern, the teachings and guidance of Grey take precedence over his shared beliefs with Catherine. Grey recognizes the danger of this over-reliance just as Virgil does at the height of Mount Purgatory. Virgil, surprised by Dante's lack of desire to meet his beloved Beatrice, encourages him to set aside his fear of the purgative fire and hasten his steps toward his beloved. Oddly, it is Virgil who is meditating on the beauty of Beatrice, imagining her eyes lead him forward, while Dante hesitates in fear. Similarly, Grey is shocked by Robert's visit to him in the midst of his spiritual crisis before seeking the counsel of his own partner in the journey. In both Robert and Dante, this speaks to a lack of understanding of the true purpose of the spiritual sojourn. It is here also that Ward's purpose in using Dante as a model for her narrative becomes problematic; if Robert is to learn the futility of seeking guidance in anyone other than his wife, his wife's role as guide then validates her orthodox views. If

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[15]*Purgatory*, Canto XXXI, ll. 34-36.

[16]Ward, 266.

Ward is intending to supplant Dante's orthodox ending with a more humanistic rendering of Christianity, the strength of Catherine and her connection to Beatrice negates her best attempts.

The consistency of Catherine also highlights the flaws of Robert. While Ward's love for her protagonist cannot be denied, it is in his inability to maintain unity with his wife instead of being constantly attracted to the guidance of others, that her harshest, albeit implicit, judgment is found. When compared, only a fool would be attracted to the dark, sinister imagery associated with the Squire, as opposed to the images of light and serenity emanating from Catherine. Ward also makes much of the domestic bliss experienced by the couple. Even in dark times, Robert and Catherine, when united, are able to take comfort and solace in their union. One such passage, referring to the couple's work to stem the outbreak of illness in Murewell, reveals the joy of love and unity even in the face of suffering and pain.

> This strain upon all the moral and physical forces, however, strangely enough, came to Robert as a kind of relief. It broke through a tension of brain which of late had become an oppression. And for both him and Catherine these dark times had moments of intensest joy, points of white light illuminating heaven and earth.
> There were cloudy nights--wet, stormy January nights--when sometimes it happened to them to come back both together from the hamlet, Robert carrying a lantern, Catherine clothed in waterproof from head to foot, walking beside him, the rays flashing now on her face, now on the wooded sides of the lane, while the wind howled through the dark vault of branches overhead. And then, as they talked or were silent, suddenly a sense of the intense blessedness of this comradeship of theirs would rise like a flood in the man's heart, and he would fling his free arm round her, forcing her to stand a moment in the January night and storm while he said to her words of passionate gratitude, of faith in an immortal union reaching beyond change or deaths lost in a kiss which was a sacrament. Then there were the moments when they saw their child, held high in Martha's arms at the window, and leaping toward her mother; the

> moments when one pallid, sickly being after another was pronounced out of danger; and by the help of them the weeks passed away.[17]

This passage is just one example of Ward's multiple reminders that the couple's time in Murewell was blessed beyond any other experience Robert might have in his work or studies. It is interesting that this bliss of marital unity occurs in cycles. This subtle reality is further evidence that Ward is creating not the story of a wedding, but the story of a marriage in which relations between husband and wife fluctuate and are never stagnant. This cyclical pattern is certainly true to life; however it is often frustrating that Robert cannot grasp the causes of the ebb and flow of his marital bliss.

Robert's inability to maintain that blessed unity occurs first in the early days of Murewell and reappears later in London. In their departure from Murewell, despite their agonizing differences and the threats of spiritual discord, husband and wife present a united front. Robert abandons his relationship with the Squire, and Catherine bears the news of his resignation as rector relatively well. Husband and wife head to London wounded but unified. However, once in the city, Robert again is distracted from the light of Catherine by both the demand of his New Brotherhood, as well as the demand of his new friends, specifically the nefarious Madame de Netteville.

This new cycle of separation results in the second major crisis in Robert's life, also brought on by lack of connection to his wife and an overall capacity to ignore reality. Recalling Madame de Netteville's initial appearance in the narrative, she is somewhat maliciously introduced to Robert by the Squire who can sense his grip on the young rector might be slipping. Immediately she represents all that Catherine is not: sophistication, worldliness, glamour, and flirtation, as well as deception, manipulation, immorality.

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[17]Ward, 288.

Immediately she attracts the attention of Robert. This Murewell scene foreshadows what, in many ways, will define the London life of the Elsmeres. While Madame de Netteville is certainly cast as a villain, Robert cannot be held blameless. In London his connection to Catherine wanes. Ward tells us that in these days, "Elsmere's happiness was perhaps nearer wreck than it had every been," as he is again irresponsible with their marriage, replacing intimacy with his wife with intimacy with Madame de Netteville and her renowned salon; London, then, in many ways, is an external re-creation of the internal Murewell crisis. Robert, surprised as he may be by Madame de Netteville's sexual overtures, set the tone for such a crisis during months of social intimacy with a woman not only not his wife, but the precise antithesis of her.

Recalling the arrangement of Dante's *Purgatory,* it is not surprising that Ward chose the threat of romantic infidelity as the final crisis which will permanently unite husband and wife. Just as Lust represents the final step in Dante's purgation, Madame de Netteville's humiliating advances provide the final purgation for Robert, ridding him of his irresponsible naïveté and finally convicting him of his neglect towards his wife. The tears of penitence Beatrice requires of Dante in order to satisfy the high decree of God are also required of Robert. His utter humiliation finally strips him of any pretences to innocence as

> The truth broke upon Elsmere very slowly, awakening in him, when at last it was unmistakable, a swift agony of repulsion, which his most friendly biographer can only regard with a kind of grim satisfaction. For after all there is an amount of innocence and absentmindedness in matters of daily human life, which is not only niaiserie, but comes very near to moral wrong. In this crowded world a man has no business to walk about with his eyes always on the stars. His stumbles may have too many consequences. A harsh but a salutary truth! If Elsmere needed it, it was bitterly taught him during a terrible half-hour. When the half-coherent enigmatical sentences, to which he listened at first with a perplexed surprise, began gradually to define themselves; when he found a woman roused and tragically beautiful between him and escape; when no

> determination on his part not to understand; when nothing he could say availed to protect her from her-self; when they were at last face to face with a confession and an appeal which were a disgrace to both--then at last Elsmere paid 'in one minute glad life's arrears'--the natural penalty of an optimism, a boundless faith in human nature, with which life, as we know it, is inconsistent.

Robert's swift and decisive reaction to Madame de Netteville's advances may provide proof that Robert has finally grown.

> 'Thank God,' he said slowly, 'thank God for yourself and me that I love my wife! I am not worthy of her--doubly unworthy, since it has been possible for any human being to suspect for one instant that I was ungrateful for the blessing of her love, that I could ever forget and dishonor her! But worthy or not----No!--no matter! Madame de Netteville, let me go, and forget that such a person exists.'[18]

This disaster plunges Elsmere into a much needed night of deep self-examination, perhaps a truer examination than he has thus far subjected himself to.

> Elsmere dived to the very depths of his own soul that night. Was it all the natural consequence of a loosened bond, of a wretched relaxation of effort--a wretched acquiescence in something second best? Had love been cooling? Had it simply ceased to take the trouble love must take to maintain itself? And had this horror been the subtle inevitable Nemesis? All at once, under the trees of the park, Elsmere stopped for a moment in the darkness, and bared his head, with the passionate reverential action of a devotee before his saint. The lurid image which had been pursuing him gave way, and in its place came the image of a new-made mother, her child close within her sheltering arm. Ah! it was all plain to him now. The moral tempest had done its work.[19]

Elsmere, as does Dante, only becomes aware of his neglected responsibilities after undergoing a painful process of penitence and purgation.

> One task of all tasks had been set him from the beginning--to keep his wife's love! If she had slipped away from him, to the injury and moral lessening of both, on his cowardice, on his clumsiness, be the blame! Above all, on his fatal power of absorbing himself in a hundred outside

[18]Ward, 527-528.

[19]Ward, 528-529.

> interests, controversy, literature, society. Even his work seemed to have lost half its sacredness. If there be a canker at the root, no matter how large the show of leaf and blossom overhead, there is but the more to wither! Of what worth is any success, but that which is grounded deep on the rock of personal love and duty?
> Oh! let him go back to her!--wrestle with her, open his heart again, try new ways, make new concessions. How faint the sense of her trial has been growing within him of late! hers which had once been more terrible to him than his own! He feels the special temptations of his own nature; he throws himself, humbled, convicted, at her feet. The woman, the scene he has left, is effaced, blotted out by the natural intense reaction of remorseful love.[20]

As he returns to his wife, we are reminded, as is Robert, of the force of his love. This powerfully portrayed reunion leads to Ward's most blatant allusion to Dante's work. After months of painful estrangement, the two lovers reunite after Robert's humiliation at the hands of Madame de Netteville. That night, Robert envisions Catherine as Beatrice,

> As she towered above him in the dimness, white and pure and drooping, her force of nature all dissolved, lost in this new heavenly weakness of love, he thought of the man who passed through the place of sin and expiation, and saw at last the rosy light creeping along the East, caught the white moving figure, and that sweet distant melody rising through the luminous air, which announced to him the approach of Beatrice and the nearness of those "shining tablelands whereof our God Himself is moon and sun." For eternal life, the ideal state is not something future and distant. Dante knew it when he talked of "quella que imparadise la mia mente." Paradise is here, visible and tangible by mortal eyes and hands whenever self is lost in loving, whenever the narrow limits of personality are beaten down by the inrush of the Divine Spirit.[21]

Here we must recognize, Robert's is not the only spiritual journey catalogued within these pages. Catherine may even be a more dynamic character than her husband. Later pages reveal a woman much changed from her cloistered youth in Westmoreland. We are told that Catherine would "live and die steadfast to the old faiths […] her present mind and

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[20]Ward, 528-529.

[21]Ward, 531.

its outlook was no more the mind of her early married life than the Christian philosophy of today is the Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages."[22] While her story has been relegated to the background of the narrative, Ward provides glimpses of pivotal points in Catherine's journey. If Robert's intellectual needs have led him to embrace a historical Jesus, devoid of divinity, Catherine began the tale a true mystic. While constantly reminding Robert of the necessity of Christ's divinity, Catherine herself runs the risk of ignoring His humanity. Her task is to learn Christ's two-sided nature produces His multi-faceted salvation.

This alteration is evident when we examine the early pages in which Robert has to work to woo his bride. His proposal contained more rebuttals against her refusals than positive offerings of his own. We must return to the important passage in which he connects her guidance to his personal salvation.

> 'I do not admit your plea,' he said passionately; 'no, not for a moment. For two days have I been tramping over the mountains thinking it out for yourself and me. Catherine, your mother has no son, she would find one in me. I have no sisters--give me yours. I will cherish them as any brother could. Come and enrich my life; you shall still fill and shelter theirs. I dare not think what my future might be without you to guide, to inspire, to bless--dare not--lest with a word you should plunge me into an outer darkness I cannot face.'
> He caught her unresisting hand, and raised it to his lips.
> 'Is there no sacredness,' he said, brokenly, 'in the fate that has brought us together-out of all the world--here in this lonely valley? Come to me, Catherine. You shall never fail the old ties, I promise you; and new hands shall cling to you--new voices shall call you blessed.'
> […]
> He rose and stood before her as he delivered his ultimatum, his tall form drawn up to its full height. In the east, across the valley, above the farther buttress of High Fell, there was a clearer strip of sky, visible for a moment among the moving storm-clouds, and a dim haloed moon shone out in it. Far away a white-walled cottage glimmered against the fell: the pools at their feet shone in the weird, passing light.

[22]Ward, 558.

> She lifted her head, and looked at him, still irresolute. Then she too rose, and helplessly, like someone impelled by a will not her own, she silently held out to him two white, trembling hands.
> 'Catherine--my angel--my wife!'
> There was something in the pale, virginal grace of look and form which kept his young passion in awe. But he bent his head again over those yielded hands, kissing them with dizzy, unspeakable joy.[23]

Even as early as this passage, Catherine is enacting her role as the Beatrice figure. Virgil tells Dante of Beatrice's journey to the depths to plead on his behalf. He relates the words of Beatrice as she justifies her abdication of her place in Paradise,

> Because you wish to know things to the core,"/ replied the lady, "I will tell in brief/ why I am not afraid to enter here./ The only things that justly cause us fear aret hose that have the power to do us harm;/ the others, not at all. By the free gift/ Of God I have been fashioned in such form,/ no misery you feel can touch me now,/ no flame of these hellfires can harrow me./ A gentle Lady in Heaven was so moved/ with pity for that soul whose way is barred,/ she broke the rigid sentence from above./ She called to Lucy, making this request:/ "Your faithful follower now has need of you;/ I give him over to your loving care." Lucy, the foe of every cruelty,/ arose and hastened to the place wehre I/ sat beside Rachel of the ancient days./" Beatrice, true praise of God, why do you not/ come to the aid of him who loved you so/ that for your sake he left the common crowd?/ Do you not hear him weeping piteously?/ Do you not see the death he wrestles with/ upon the flood tide violent as the sea?" No man was ever quicker in the world/ to seize his profit or to flee his harm/ than I was, when I heard the words she spoke,/ Leaving my blessed set to come down here/ to ret my trust upon your noble speech,/ which honors you and those who heed it well.[24]

We see here that just as Beatrice's stern judgment of Dante is broken in her traveling to Virgil, so is Catherine forced to bend to meet Robert where he is. It is also important to note the sender; it is Mary who admonishes Beatrice for hesitating and sends her forth to aid her beloved. Mary, in Dante's work a symbol of the Incarnation, is also the name of

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[23]Ward, 143.

[24]*Inferno*, Canto II, ll. 85-113.

Robert and Catherine's child. For them, Mary serves as a symbol of their union, the union of their diverse natures.

As with each character, Ward gleans inspiration from her real life experiences. Catherine is a conglomeration of several figures including Ward's mother. A strong willed evangelical, Julia Arnold suffered miserably for her husband's series of conversions and re-conversions between Catholicism and the Anglican faith. Religious disharmony plagued Ward's childhood and her mother certainly stood for the extreme end of evangelical faith. The softer side of Catherine is reminiscent of Ward's friend Laura Lyttelton to whom the book is dedicated (along with Green). However, while Catherine is certainly comprised of pieces of Julia Arnold, Laura Lyttelton and others, her most telling antecedent is the author herself. In many ways, Catherine represents all the pieces of Ward's fractured religious self that cannot let go of orthodoxy and Christian tradition, despite her best efforts. This novel is a testament to that struggle, and in many ways, Catherine's character wins out, thus implying that Ward's own heart was more attached to orthodoxy than repelled by it. This assertion certainly plays out in Ward's life, where, in spite of her well publicized anti-orthodox views, her strongest desire as the years passed was to be allowed communion in the Church of England. In later years, her attraction to the orthodox nearly resulted in a conversion to Catholicism, thus showing her views were not as clear cut as much of the criticism supposes.

Despite her strength of opinion, Catherine's character is far from stagnant. Robert's return from Madame de Netteville reveals much about his character's growth, but perhaps even more about Catherine's. Realizing she has been as narrow in her clinging to the divinity of Christ as Robert has been in his insistence on the humanity, Catherine recaps

her own spiritual journey. She too has suffered, a "fiery furnace of pain." She has "been wandering in strange places, strange thoughts."[25] Looking back, it is in moments of intense suffering that Catherine's Christian love has shone brightest. After her difficult childbirth, her heart broke for the "pain of the world."[26] In her own suffering, she realized that "to give all one is, or ever can be, to comforting!" is the truest embodiment of Christianity possible on earth."[27] Here we note a distinction in the paths she and Robert must take to meet in the middle; his is a journey from Man to God and hers from God to Man.

Robert's most direct experience with physical suffering is portrayed in the night spent ministering to the sick laborer. His maelstrom of thoughts are said to have "led him further and further from man to God, from human defect to the Eternal Perfectness;" he credits Catherine as having revealed this truth to him.

It is in the pain of childbirth that Catherine enacts the inversion of Robert's journey.

'Robert, I cannot put it out of my head. I cannot forget it, *the pain of the world!*'

He shut the book he was reading, her hand in his, and bent over her with questioning eyes.

> 'It seems' she went on with that difficulty which a strong nature always feels in self-revelation, 'to take the joy even out of our love--and the child. I feel ashamed almost that mere physical pain should have laid such hold on me--and yet I can't get away from it. It's not for myself,' and she smiled faintly at him. 'Comparatively I had so little to bear! But I know now for the first time what physical pain may mean--and I never knew before! I lie thinking, Robert, about all creatures in pain--workmen crushed by machinery, or soldiers--or poor things in hospitals--above all of women! Oh, when I get well, how I will take care of the women here! What women must suffer even here in out-of-the-way cottages--no doctor, no kind nursing, all blind agony and struggle! And women in London in dens like those Mr. Newcome got into, degraded, forsaken, ill-treated, the

[25]Ward, 530.

[26]Ward, 264.

[27]Ward, 265.

> thought of the child only an extra horror and burden! And the pain all the time so merciless, so cruel--no escape! Oh, to give all one is, or ever can be, to comforting! And yet the great sea of it one can never touch! It is a nightmare--I am weak still, I suppose; I don't know myself; but I can see nothing but jarred, tortured creatures everywhere. All my own joys and comforts seem to lift me selfishly above the common lot.'[28]

For Robert, a recognition of pain is necessary to make the leap from Man to God; for Catherine that pain leads her from God to Man. Realizing the power of the Incarnation lies in God's willing assumption of Man's suffering, Catherine learns Christianity requires an attendance to the humanity of Christ as well as to the divinity. Her suffering has taught her "God has not one language, but many." She realizes she must learn to "hear the two voices, the voice that speaks to [Robert] and the voice that speaks to [her]."[29]

In addition to the pain of childbirth, Catherine must also bear the pain of separation from her husband. The detachment and distance the couple endures during Robert's spiritual wanderings teaches Catherine mercy in a more direct and personal way than she had previously known. In that mental and emotional suffering, Catherine learns to be willing to take on the views of her husband, empathizing with and appropriating his pain, not compromising her own beliefs, but, in effect, acting out those beliefs by carrying his load. In the vital reunion scene after Robert's humiliation at the hands of Madame de Netteville, Catherine refuses to hear her husband's apology, understanding her own lack of sympathy and graciousness deem her complicit in the debacle. Her own painful night had been passed conversing with Hugh Flaxman and discovering all the ways she had neglected Robert in his quest for truth. Cognizant then of her own shortcomings, Catherine refuses to hear the self-blame of another.

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[28]Ward, 264-265.

[29]Ward, 530.

The nature of Christ must encompass both the divine and the human for it to have any redemptive power and Catherine must learn this lesson as well as Robert. It is in this scene of reunion between husband and wife, a scene characterized by penitence and forgiveness, in which "something half-jeopardized" was "wholly recovered;" this is the scene in which Ward perfects the Dantesque theme of romantic love leading to divine.[30] Just as Beatrice is called "the light between truth and intellect," Catherine's love provides the bridge between Robert's doubts and her own convictions.[31] The union of these "two voices" reflects Dante's vision of the Eternal Light in which "the scattered elements unite,/ bound all with love into one book of praise,/ in the deep ocean of the infinite."[32]

Pure and Ready to Rise to the Stars

She lived for one hope only; and the years passed all too slowly.

…….

From its most holy wates I returned
as remade as a new young plant appears
renewed in every newly springing frond,
Pure, and in trim for mounting to the stars..[33]

In light of the Incarnation, Catherine must learn to empty her self for love of others, but Robert must accept Christ as more than a martyr or a symbol in order to be redeemed. Many critics have found Robert's death scene problematic. However, following the model of Dante which Ward has already established, this final scene allows both Catherine and Robert to envision a fuller Christ than they had ever before known. While Ward may have

[30]Ward, 530.

[31]*Purgatory* VI 45-46; Here I use Singleton's translation.Esolen translates as "a light of truth to shine upon your mind."

[32]*Paradise* Canto XXXIII, ll. 83-87.

[33]*Purgatory*, Canto XXXIII, ll. 142-145.

intended her use of Dante to highlight Robert's experience as the new and enlightened spiritual pilgrim, she underestimates the necessity of maintaining the end goal, the vision of God in His essence, without which neither Dante's work nor Ward's would be successful.

Dante's beatific vision, the culmination of his spiritual journey, illustrates the doctrine of the Incarnation. The vision, which is the "end of all desires" and the "object of the will," is the vision of Christ Incarnate, a being who "Within, and in its own hue, seemed to be/ tinted with the figure of a Man." Dante goes on to say, "So did I stare at this strange sight, to make the image fit/ the aureole, and see it enter there:/ But mine were not the feathers for that flight,/ Save the truth I longed for came to me,/ smiting my mind like lightning flashing bright."[34]

The contemplation of the Incarnation, Man-God, is the goal of man's spiritual journey. Catherine's spiritual sojourn teaches her to embrace humanity. When, at her dying husband's bedside, she envisions Christ calling her, her duty is to "die to Him."[35] This is perhaps one of the most difficult, yet poignant scenes in the novel. Catherine sacrifices what is most dear to her nature, union with Christ, for the love of man. Mindful of Christ's similar actions, it is important to recall again that Beatrice had to leave Paradise in order to retrieve Dante from his wandering ways. Her hold on the spiritual must loosen in order to meet human need. Catherine similarly learns charity and sacrifice and thus achieves the vision of Love Dante illustrates in his final Canto.

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[34]*Paradise* Canto XXXIII, ll. 127-141; In his notes, Singleton points out that "The wayfarer's wings were themselves not powerful enough to uplift him to the vision of the deepest mystery, but divine grace now intervenes…" (Singleton *Paradiso: Commentary* 585).Dante recognizes the need for the divine to compensate for the weakness of the human, which Robert must learn.

[35]Ward, 604.

Robert's vision differs from Catherine's, but the end goal remains constant. Throughout his adult life his vision of Christ has come mainly through Catherine. However, in the end his mind is on the birth of his child. His vision causes him to cry out "The child's cry!- Thank God!"[36] For Dante, the beatific vision comes only through his pleas to Mary, Love revealed. For Robert, his daughter, Mary, carries him into eternity. It is Mary's status as virgin and mother, perhaps depicting Christianity's greatest miracle, which ushers Robert, who supposedly refuses the miraculous, into the afterlife.

This connection to Mary is even more vital to the ending of the novel than this reading at first implies. A cancelled passage from the original manuscript reveals Robert's own recognition of his connection to Dante.

> A sort of allegory of himself ran vaguely through his mind. He felt as though he had been forcing his way for weeks through some dense and baffling forest, tangled by the creeper[s], bewildered by the closeness of the trees, stifled for lack of air, crushed by the sense of the impenetratable [sic] distance and discoverable issues. And suddenly the trees thin around him, the air grows lighter, the wood falls back, and under the blessed sky and wind of an uncovered heaven, there rises in a clearing made by pious hands a white and tender image, - a vision of the Mother and Child. And forgetting all the passion and the desperation of that long struggle through the blinding hindering branches, he falls on his knees, the heart crying out with joy, the black oppression lifted.[37]

This dream-like conception of Robert's struggle to escape the darkness of doubt is rife with Dante's own symbolism and imagery. In addition to the clearing of the shadows, the vision of the Mother and Child provides an interesting parallel to this final death scene. Mary, as mother of God, is representative of the glory of the Incarnation while Mary, child of Robert and Catherine, is the emblem of their utmost unity; this pair

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[36]Ward, 604.

[37]Ward qtd. in Peterson, 150.

of symbols both identifies and inspires the movement toward the goal of Robert and Catherine's spiritual and marital sojourn. This vision of mother and child occurs in various places throughout the narrative, but these final lines of the cancelled passage seem to hold the key to Robert's enigmatic death utterance as, facing the double force of his family and the Virgin and Christ, all that is dark is finally cleared and true enlightenment, the enlightenment for which he for so long fought, is achieved.

In addition to this interpretation of their final visions, support for Robert and Catherine's united orthodoxy is found in the surprising information we are provided after the death of our title character. Catherine does not let the dreams of her husband die along with him.

> Instead, she settled down again in London, and not one of those whom Robert Elsmere had loved was forgotten by his widow. Every Sunday morning, with her child beside her, she worshipped in the world ways; every Sunday afternoon saw her black-veiled figure sitting motionless in a corner of the Elgood Street Hall. In the week she gave all her time to money to the various works of charity which he had started. But she held her peace. Many were grateful to her; some loved her; none understood her. She lived for one hope only; and the years passed all too slowly.[38]

While Gladstone and others are disappointed in this conclusion, interpreting Catherine's participation in Robert's ministry as proof of Robert's success in converting his wife to his heretical ways, In fact, the opposite is suggested in this passage. First, we must recognize the small but vital fact that it is Catherine, not Robert who survives. Despite its title, the book begins and ends with the life of Catherine.

While she certainly has undergone her own spiritual transformation, Catherine's role as guide has never been questioned. She has consistently been portrayed as Robert's beacon of truth and the connection to Beatrice leaves no room for any other

[38]Ward, 604.

interpretation. We must ask, if Ward has so faithfully followed Dante's pattern thus far, why would we suspect her to veer from that path at the end? As so often stated, this is the story of a marriage and it is Robert and Catherine's core desire for unity that drives the narrative. In fact, Ward's explication of the New Brotherhood and Robert's individual life in London is the weakest section of the novel; the story sags as the focus is removed from the relational aspects. Without Catherine, both Robert's character and the novel as a whole become flat and uninteresting. In many ways, it is the figure of Catherine and her faithful struggle to achieve unity with her husband that saves this novel from pure didacticism.

In this final description Catherine is able to offer her support to Robert's mission, not because she accepts his doctrine, but because she is no longer threatened by it. In loosening her tight fisted grip on spirituality, she is able to see the human need around her. While Robert lived and they struggled through their emotionally estranged days in London, there is no mention of Catherine's community activity. A woman, once so actively involved in the lives of the poor around her, has isolated herself from the needs of her husband's congregation because of dogmatic difference. Her final lesson teaches her that serving and self-sacrifice does not threaten orthodoxy, but is required by it. Catherine, who has been presented throughout the novel as relatively self-aware, trustworthy, and wise, has no doubt concerning her husband's fate. The words "She lived for one hope only; and the years passed all too slowly," reveal a complete faith that she and her husband will again be united under the vision of Christ. Her task until then is to enact that vision, the fulfillment of humanity and divinity, on earth.[39]

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[39]Ward, 604.

The apparently paradoxical concept that Catherine's vision of Christ and Robert's vision of the birth of his child are both representations of the same spiritual message may seem difficult to grasp. Lest we are tempted to point out the inconsistencies of a beatific vision so various in its representations, we must turn again to Dante who reminds us the vision changes

> Not that I saw more than a single face/ as I was gazing into the living glow,/ for it is ever as it ever was,/ But in my vision winning valor so,/ that sole appearance as I changed by seeing/ appeared to change and form itself anew.[40]

In these lines we are brought back to the central message of Dante and the message that pervades Ward's work; the pilgrim is transformed to meet the goal, while the goal remains constant. In the end, both Catherine and Robert could feel "[their] will and [their] desires/ turned" as Catherine's "instinct" and Robert's "intellect" "as a wheel in equal balance –by/ The Love that moves the sun and the other stars."[41]

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[40] *Paradise* Canto XXXIII, ll. 109-114.Singleton's translation is perhaps clearer here: "[…] not because that Living Radiance bore/ more than one semblance, for It is unchanging/ and is forever as it was before;/ rather, as I grew worthier to see,/ the more I looked, the more unchanging semblance/ appeared to change with every change in me "

[41] *Paradise* Canto XXXIII, 141-145.

CHAPTER FIVE

EPILOGUE

Despite its unprecedented success, Mrs. Humphry Ward's first novel fell from critical grace as quickly as it rose to commercial success. Just a few years after Gladstone wrestled with the book, a new generation of literary figures berated it as the prime example of the Victorian period they had grown to despise. In keeping with the irreverent style of their day, a far cry from the previous generation's reserve and decorum, literary figures of the *fin de siecle* regarded *Robert Elsmere* as the antithesis of art, one poet even going as far as to hope that "all of Mrs. Ward's heroines might be raped *en masse* by an invading army."[1]

The pulse of the culture had changed drastically in the short span of the intervening years. A reviewer for *The Academy* related the original reaction to *Robert Elsmere* as an awe-filled, furtive, plucking of the proverbial apple; within twenty years however, the shock of dissension had been rendered passé.[2] E.F. Benson recognized that "Victorianism was already dead and buried, and nobody was concerned to meddle with what was decaying so nicely."[3] In one of the more tactful opinions, Dean Inge writes of Ward,

> It is difficult to predict how far her great fame as a novelist will be lasting. The immense sale of Robert Elsmere was not due entirely to the merits of the book, and there is something soigné about her style which will not

[1]Arnold Bennet qtd. in Peterson, 4.

[2]Peterson, 206.

[3]Newsome, 244.

> conduce to popularity. It may be that after a period of undeserved neglect her novels may be recognized as giving an accurate picture of the life of the upper and upper-middle class in the last generation of their prosperity.[4]

In many ways, his judgment about the reasons behind the novel's success are justified; its merits aside, timing was everything to the novel. Its subject matter hit a nerve with a huge cross-section of readers and connected so directly that it seems inevitable that its relevance would be short-lived. However, a less biased reading is able to recognize the aspects of the novel that are didactic and archaic, as well as those that are enduring and relevant even today.

Ironically, it is the portions to which Ward was most attached that appear outdated and shallow to the modern reader (and to the reader of the subsequent generation). The London sections, outlining Robert's New Brotherhood are by far the weakest of the novel. Peterson notes that, despite Ward's hopes, Robert is not a strong enough character to bear the weight of being the "representative modern doubter," the harbinger of a revitalized Christian faith which would revolutionize religion in Europe.[5] It is in these portions that he regrets the flattening of Elsmere into a mere "instrument of propaganda."[6] One of the wittiest and damning criticisms of Ward's portrayal of Robert in these sections came from her friend Henry James who warned her, "One fears a little sometimes, that [Robert] may suffer a sunstroke, damaging if not fatal, from the high, oblique light of your admiration for him."[7]

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[4]Dean Inge qtd. in Peterson, 1.

[5]Peterson, 132.

[6]Peterson, 152.

[7]Henry James qtd. in Peterson, 152.

Caught up in her worship of Robert, Ward fails to recognize the growing secularism of the world around her. This is one serious difficulty modern readers may find with the book; it is often complicated to distinguish Ward's allegedly Christian setup from pure secularism. When asked, as Ward does in a letter to her husband, will there be a substitute which shall still be Christianity?[8] Modern Christians must answer no; Robert did not convince the Church otherwise.

When trying to distinguish Ward's so-called Christianity from secularism, we are reminded of Robert's experience with the London men who defame and desecrate the image of Christ. This infuriates Robert and leads to much debate and interaction between him and the community. When reading from this side of modernism, however, it becomes hard not to see the connection between Robert's views and the views of the secularists. This side of Nietzsche's "God is Dead" and Dostoevsky's follow-up, we wonder- where lies the harm in parodying and vandalizing an image of a mere man? By the time Ward attempted a follow-up to *Robert Elsmere,* the pulse of the nation had so changed that her ideas were virtually obsolete. Aestheticism and Decadence were results of a desire to reject all Victorianism had to offer; the new generation "claimed complete freedom for themselves to defy every requirement of decorum," they "regarded with repugnance" the values cherished by Ward and treated in her novels.[9] One modern critic notes,

> Where [Ward]went astray was not in her scholarship, which was impeccable, but in her reading of the temper of the new century, for Mrs. Ward's Victorian sensibility misled her into believing that the majority of men and women were hungering and thirsting for a modernized version of

[8]Smith, 33.

[9]Newsome, 250.

> Christianity. She had not taken sufficiently into account the growing secularization of the contemporary world, the decline of all institutional forms of Christianity, whether conservative or liberal, and the widespread indifference to theological questions. The fallacy of The Case of Richard Meynell [Robert's sequel] was Mrs. Ward's assumption that most of her readers shared her own deep-seated desire to return once again to the Communion rail of the Church in order to recover an elusive peace of mind.[10]

Ward's typical Arnoldian struggle to straddle the fence between tradition and innovation, orthodoxy and heresy is frustrating for readers who either cannot accept her conclusions or do not understand why she cares so much.

Despite so much irrelevance, however, there are aspects of *Robert Elsmere* that are eternally applicable; it is the story of hope in the face of doubt, reunification, and love's ability to transform the profane into the divine that save Ward's tale from purely irrelevant didacticism. This runs parallel to much of Victorian culture. Froude says of his generation,

> Between us and the old England there lies a gulf of mystery which the power of the historian will never adequately bridge […] Only among the aisles of the cathedral, only as we gaze upon those silent figures sleeping on their tombs, some faint conceptions float before us of what these men were when they were alive; and perhaps in the sound of church bells, that peculiar creation of medieval age, which falls upon the ear like the echo of a vanished world.[11]

This echo of the vanished world of Victorian England is present in the novel, as well as the echo of the eternal history of mankind: a history characterized by experiences very similar to Robert's. In this traditional everyman form, both Dante and Robert preserve for readers a sense of eternality and transcendence.

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[10]Peterson, 206.

[11]Froude qtd. in Newsome, 178.

Had Robert lived, or had his author presented a more balanced perspective, he would have seen very soon the Church's defense against all the doubt-inducing attacks of the previous generation. So much that shocked and appalled one day, seemed orthodox the next.

> In fact, through these same decades and well into the next century, all the Christian churches were showing signs of a new vitality. From some quarters there was a decided counter-attack. Unquestionably too, Christian defenses were being reappraised and reorganized. Much of what had seemed shocking to Christians at first had had time to be absorbed and appreciated for its positive rather than its potentially destructive significance. Darwinism, for instance, by the close of the century had become so much part of the accepted thinking within the Establishment that Darwin's remains were interred in Westminster Abby.[12]

A revitalized believing population sought to partner science and faith, even appropriating the infamous Darwin to fit into an evolving orthodoxy. The German scholarship which reduced Elsmere's faith to shreds was called into question as early as the time of *Robert Elsmere's* publication. Behind her times in so many ways, Ward's insistence on the primacy of the *zeitgeist* failed to take into account developing scholarship on the subject which claimed:

> German learning is decidedly imposing. But […]with all that there has been of great in German work there has been also a large proportion of what is bad –conceited, arrogant, shallow, childish…Those who have been so eager to destroy have not been so successful in construction. Clever theories come to nothing; streams which began with much noise at last lose themselves in the sand […] Criticism has pulled about the Bible without restraint or scruple […] Have its leaders yet given us an account which it is reasonable to receive, clear, intelligible, self-consistent and consistent with all the facts, of what this mysterious book is?[13]

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[12]Newsome, 213.

[13]R.W. Church's review of *Robert Elsmere* qtd. in Newsome, 226.

Cambridge scholar J.B. Lightfoot made his mark on theological history by countering the claims of F.C. Baur and his entire school of thought; in 1885 he published a book entitled *Apostolic Fathers* which "virtually exploded Baur's contention for the non-apostolic authorship of the Gospels."[14]

From Oxford, a definitive response to the controversial *Essays and Reviews* of Ward's day provided the orthodox answer to much of her difficulties with the faith. The volume, entitled *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, addressed many of these issues Ward had taken for granted in her novel, thus contributing to its speedy obsolescence. Dealing with issues from Old Testament interpretation to the doctrine of kenosis, the work was unified under "the emphatic conviction of the centrality of the doctrine of the Incarnation, which, when properly understood, was the most elevating and exhilarating revelation of God's purpose for man."[15]

Artistically, a reaffirmation of the Incarnation was also taking place. Robert Browning, the favored "incarnationalist" poet, penned the lines

I say the acknowledgement of God in Christ

Accepted by thy reason solves for thee

All questions in the earth and out of it.[16]

Perhaps if Robert Elsmere had survived, he could have experienced this resurgence of traditional faith. His author, to some degree, may have. Although never fully resolving her sense of religious division, Ward never leaves orthodoxy behind. Much as Catherine

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[14]Newsome, 226.

[15]Gore qtd in Newsome, 226.

[16]Robert Browning "A Death in the Desert"

provides the backbone of Robert's tale, Ward's life was characterized by her search for resolution. It is consistent with our reading of *Robert Elsmere* that, in the end, Mrs. Ward very nearly converted to Catholicism, her desire for orthodoxy was so strong. Gladstone finds consolation in knowing that "if the ancient and continuous creed of Christendom has slipped away from its place in Mrs. Ward's brilliant and subtle understanding, it has nevertheless by no means lost a true, if unacknowledged, hold upon the inner sanctuary of her heart."[17] Ward's own life, constantly longing for spiritual peace, is testament to the lack of satisfaction found in replacing the vision of the eternal God with a vision of mere, changing Man.

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[17]Gladstone, 788.

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