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Poverty and the Picture Gallery: the Whitechapel Exhibitions and the social project of Ruskinian aesthetics

i) Introduction: defining "aesthetic experience"

When critics write about "the aesthetic" today, they almost always invoke the notion of a separate realm removed from practical consequences. It is this conception of the aesthetic that has led a recent critic to dismiss the Whitechapel art exhibitions organized by Canon Samuel Augustus and Mrs Henrietta Olivia Barnett in the 1880s and 1890s (which eventually led to the founding of the Whitechapel Art Gallery) as fundamentally propagandistic exercises. In this view, the practical purposes which the Bernetts had in mind when they organized the exhibitions necessarily disqualify them as properly aesthetic experiences.¹

I do not intend to dispute the ideological nature of the Whitechapel exhibitions; indeed, much of this paper is devoted to showing the close connection between the Bernetts' ideas about art and their ideas about methods of poor relief. What I would like to question, however, is the common assumption that properly "aesthetic" experience is at odds with practical attempts at social reform. What makes the Bernetts interesting, I shall suggest, is precisely the continuity in their thinking between social reform and the aesthetic. It is this continuity which should lead us to complicate and relativize our notions of what constitutes properly "aesthetic" experience.

The problem which the Bernetts pose has wider implications for our understanding of what "aesthetic experience" meant in the nineteenth century. One obvious implication is for our understanding of Ruskin, who greatly influenced the Bernetts. The difficulty of making connections between his aesthetic and social thought is a commonplace among Ruskin commentators, but the perspective outlined in this paper suggests how one might go about establishing the essential coherence of Ruskin's position, despite the shifts in emphasis that occur at various points in his career.

Another implication is for how we conceptualize "aesthetic experience". One of my main arguments is that late nineteenth century debates in Britain about the nature of aesthetic experience derive quite directly from earlier eighteenth century British philosophical debates about the nature of experience itself. This shouldn't really surprize us, given the obvious interest of Walter Pater, for example, in the philosophy of David Hume.²

What this paper attempts to do, however, is to outline the other side of this British philosophical debate, which is far less known than Hume: the position of the philosopher Thomas Reid and his followers, collectively referred to as "the Common Sense school". I trace the affinity of the Ruskinian conception of what painting is with the fundamental claim of the Common Sense school that all sensory experience is a process of interpreting perceptual signs.³

Conceiving of perception as a process of interpretation radically alters the notion of "aesthetic experience". Instead of presupposing a condition of passive sensuous receptiveness, the painting comes to require an active engagement of the mind, which is assimilated in the thought of Ruskin and the Bernetts to labour. The appreciation of painting can thus be seen as a preparation for work, and as an antidote to the mental laziness characteristics of "pauperism".⁴

The current difficulties of critics with figures such as the Bernetts and Ruskin can in this way be seen to stem from the overwhelming dominance of a Paterian/Whistlerian conception of "aesthetic experience". In presenting a Ruskinian aesthetic, I hope to suggest that we should pay more attention to the relationship between aesthetics and epistemology.

ii) Is there a Ruskinian aesthetics?

The title of my paper takes for granted that it is legitimate to refer to the interest in art shown by Ruskin and his followers as an "aesthetic" interest. But if we regard "the aesthetic" in Whistlerian terms, as excluding all considerations other than immediate sensuous impact, then the kind of interest which Ruskin suggests true art ought to excite cannot be characterized as "aesthetic".⁵

A more appropriate emphasis for the discussion of Ruskinian aesthetics would be on "disinterestedness". The sense of "the aesthetic" as disinterested contemplation is of course what lies behind Ruskin's preference for the term "theoretic" rather than "aesthetic" to describe the nature of legitimate interest in art; it is also, as we shall see, what underpins the Bernetts' interest in making the experience of art available to the poor.⁶

A recent critic, Frances Borzello, has disputed that the Bernetts were interested in promoting any kind of experience that could properly be termed "aesthetic", and has characterized the Whitechapel Exhibitions, mainly on the basis of the descriptions of paintings contained in the printed catalogue produced by the Bernetts and their associates, as crude exercises in propanganda for Victorian family values. Borzello cites an article by Henrietta Barnett, "The Poverty of the Poor", as evidence for her claim that the Bernetts regarded the poor as deficient in "family values".⁷

In fact, the main thrust of this article is not that the poor lack an appreciation of family life, but that the miserable wages paid to the working man make supporting a family difficult (and thus, presumably, mean that working-class women are forced to go out to work, with all the disruption of family life that entails). The article's sustained economic analysis makes Borzello's claim that "the Bernetts..believed..the key to the perfect society lay not in economics but in de-brutalizing the poor" a half-truth at best. Although they may not have believed in economic determinism, the Bernetts certainly believed that the economy of their day worked to "brutalize" the poor: in fact, as we shall see, they extended this economic analysis to the institutions of poor relief.⁸

I do not want to argue that the Bernetts' Whitechapel Exhibitions

should not be regarded as "ideological" in nature, but neither did they constitute moralistic propaganda. Borzello's attribution of the supposedly propagandistic impulse at work behind the Whitechapel exhibitions to the influence of Ruskin's "theories of moralized aesthetics" is highly questionable. Much of Ruskin's later work can be seen as a sustained protest against the instrumentalization of art: the Bernetts would have got their Ruskin very wrong if they had thought his theory sanctioned a moralistic appropriation of art, no matter how laudable the intended purpose.⁹

Borzello's characterization of the Whitechapel exhibitions relies on an opposition between the moralistic "ideology" of family values which she attributes to the Bernetts and a disinterested, truly "aesthetic" mode of interest in art, by which standard she finds the Whitechapel exhibitions wanting. In contrast, I want to suggest that the thinking which lay behind the exhibitions was "ideological" because it enlisted a belief in the disinterested nature of "aesthetic" experience in the service of a project of social reform. What makes the Bernetts', and Ruskin's, writing about art "ideological" in nature is their assumptions about the nature of artistic form, rather than any particular descriptions of content.

A certain ideology of "activity" and work is inherent in the Ruskinian account of what looking at a picture involves, and that this is what leads the Bernetts to propose the experience of art as a remedy against the enforced idleness of "pauperism". The "mental work", or active involvement of the mind in the process of perception, which a painting both requires from its viewers and of which, on the part of the artist, it is an expression, trains the mind in those habits of self-discipline which are essential to any kind of work. In this Ruskinian view, the emphasis on "work" does not contradict the characterization of the "aesthetic" as disinterested contemplation, because work itself is conceived as fundamentally disinterested in character (Ruskin stressed that true work was not essentially motivated by material reward, and this formed part of his quarrel with Whistler, whom he did regard as motivated by monetary gain).¹⁰

For Ruskinians such as the Bernetts, the morally important feature of work is its "form", as an exercise in self-denial. Regarding work in terms of its "content" of material reward leads to the mental condition characteristic of "pauperism", an immersion in immediate sensuous gratification whose corollary is a work-shy attitude. This position implies that what is character-building about the experience of art is not actual pictorial content but the process of viewing and interpreting a picture.¹¹

This emphasis on work, and its relationship to the formal process of pictorial interpretation, can be seen in one of the catalogue entries quoted by Borzello in support of her argument about the essentially propagandistic impulse behind the Whitechapel exhibitions:

What the Bernetts did with art was to use it as a vehicle for the preaching of Christian values. It is in the catalogue comments - the official captions to the pictures, as it were - that one sees most clearly what the Bernetts believed and what they believed paintings could do. In these comments, where teaching and preaching are

woven together, the Barnetts' attitudes and values appear in innocent nakedness. Although some explanations were aimed at sowing the seeds of art appreciation, what the Barnetts really hoped to do with their comments was impart not an aesthetic education but a moral one, their vision of the perfect Christian world...In 1887, a seventeenth-century Flemish painting inspired the explanation: "At the mid-day meal, at the moment of saying grace. It is evidently a family where everyone lived, dressed, and prayed by rule and with obedience. Such was the secret of the patient industry which enabled the Dutch to protect their own country from the sea, and to conquer lands beyond the sea elsewhere." This uncompromising expression of religion and family as the secret of a successful society, when considered in the light of the Barnetts' experience of the imperfect family life of Whitechapel, shows the way they used pictures to propagate their personal Utopia.¹²

If we read the catalogue entry closely, the characteristics to which it draws attention are the distinctly non-pictorial ones of "rule", "obedience" and, by an even further extrapolation beyond the scene depicted, "patient industry". The viewer is being challenged to convert visible features of the painting into abstract qualities through a labour of interpretation which mirrors the "patient industry" the catalogue attributes to the Dutch.¹³

The catalogue entry is self-referential, in that it is describing the moral effects of the labour to which it is assuming this description will stimulate the viewer. Instead of presenting the pictures as moral examples to be passively imitated by the poor, the catalogue's effect can be seen as encouraging viewers to engage in an active appropriation of the picture through interpretation.

As we shall see, for the Barnetts, as for Ruskin, it is the formal process of interpretation, not the content of the interpretation, that constitutes the moral education a picture has to offer. From this point of view the "moralizing" tendency of the entry represents an attempt to engage with an audience, rather than to talk down to them. The catalogue's "narrative" is provided to encourage viewers to look at the painting; the Barnetts are not exhibiting the picture simply for the sake of the narrative that is attached to it in the catalogue.

iii) Landscape art and the language of painting

A feature of the Barnetts' exhibiting policy which testifies to the emphasis on form rather than content in their aesthetic thought is the trouble they took to exhibit landscape. Frances Borzello cites Henrietta Barnett's comment, in her article "Pictures for the People", that special pains were taken to introduce the poor to landscape art (although it was narrative art that was the most popular). Borzello assimilates this emphasis on landscape, however, to her overall view of the Barnetts as being engaged in an instrumentalization of art for their "improving" purposes.¹⁴

Borzello's characterization of the Whitechapel exhibitions as propagandistic leads her to emphasize pictorial content, as is evident in her comment on the catalogue entry to A W Bayes' *Entrance to the Clothes Exchange (Houndsditch)*:

A familiar bit of our own East London. Our friends will hardly recognize the bright colors in which the artist has painted the dingy Clothes Exchange. Yet the picture will serve to remind us that only a desire for beauty is needed to give Houndsditch something of the picturesqueness of Venice.¹⁵

Borzello remarks that "the comments also show that any glamorous

depiction of London in paint was expected to meet with some resistance on the part of the spectators". But implicit in the entry is an emphasis on an aesthetic transformation of everyday life. Beauty, it is suggested, is not something inherent in a particular class of objects, but is the result of an act of will: the "desire for beauty" will make even Houndsditch beautiful. It is this theory of aesthetic experience as consisting in a process of active transfiguration of the world of perception which underlies the attitude towards the social function of art which led the Barnetts to mount the Whitechapel Exhibitions.

The Barnetts' own preference for landscape over narrative art implies this aesthetic transformation of the visible world, since the significance of a landscape, unlike that of a narrative painting, must result from what the painting itself manages to convey about the scene, rather than from any external source of information. G F Watts, whose paintings were exhibited regularly at the Whitechapel exhibitions, describes this transformative power of landscape painting, in a passage which could be seen as summing up the Barnetts' programme of educational outreach:

Art...[is] more than ever valuable, and even necessary, in an age, like the present, of social surroundings devoid of outward beauty and nobility, where the workers have little leisure, and in a country where the uncertain climate precludes the general habits of outdoor recreation...Its..value in an overworked age [is] as a graceful source of recreation, and as an educational factor. Eyes and mind little inclined to observe and receive pleasure and improvement from natural objects will often be stimulated by art to find pleasure in discovering for themselves the objects in nature that interested them in pictures. Natural objects presented to eyes that have been delighted by a beautiful representation of them will henceforth be very different from what they were before the representation gave them peculiar interest. The artist has been to these an interpreter of nature. He has revealed something more than had been previously perceived, and an awakened interest and delight takes the place of the old indifference.¹⁶

Watts' account of the social value of art invokes a notion of "defamiliarization": a painting's representation of the natural world requires the spectator to pay attention to the manner in which the natural world has been perceived by the artist, as shown by the way this perception is expressed on canvas, and it is this attention to the process of perception that transforms the spectator's subsequent, first-hand perceptions of nature. Watts' description of the educative effect of painting is focused on "form", or the inherent structure of the act of looking at a painting.¹⁷

Watts' characterization of the value of art as consisting in "recreation" echoes the Barnetts own vocabulary, since the Barnetts' work in putting on the Whitechapel Exhibitions forms part of a wider interest in encouraging the poor to make a more effective use of their leisure time. For the Barnetts, part of the function of leisure time should be that defamiliarization of perception which Watts describes as inherent in the experience of art.¹⁸

Samuel Barnett set out his own view of the moral and social value of art in an uncompromising defence of his decision to open the exhibitions on Sundays:

Well would it be if pictures were recognised as preachers, as voices of God, passing His lessons from age to age. The nation would not then dare to silence those voices on

Sunday, and private owners would recognise the right of their brothers to the teaching of their common Father.¹⁹

It may seem hard to reconcile the apparently excessive religious rhetoric employed by Barnett with the essentially formalist aesthetic of defamiliarization to which I argue he and his wife, together with Watts, subscribe. I would suggest, however, that Barnett intends his description of pictures as "voices of God" quite literally, and that this attribution of transcendent moral value to pictures is entirely compatible with the formalist aesthetic of defamiliarization which underlies their view of the educative value of art.

The key to this apparent paradox lies in the fact that the moral value Barnett attributes to paintings is, precisely, transcendent: Barnett does not go into details about what exactly the "voices of God" will be saying. The morality which he claims is inherent in painting is a morality without specific content, a morality which will be different for each individual. Given this purely "formal" definition, it is not hard to see how it would be compatible with a formalist aesthetic. Barnett shows his sympathy with advanced trends in theological and ethical thought in a late essay on "The Religion of the People" in which he advances a relativist argument about "forms of religion" not so far removed intellectually from the religious syncretism of G F Watts and his second wife, and from this point of view his claims for the inherent morality of art are not very different from Baudelairian aestheticism.²⁰

Barnett's theological views do not explain, however, why he attaches this transcendent moral value specifically to paintings. Here that the Ruskinian basis of the Barnetts' notions about art becomes important. Far from being "moralistic" in the way Borzello claims, Ruskin's thinking about art implies the formalist aesthetic of defamiliarization which we have identified in the Barnetts and Watts. Ruskin's "moralism" is intimately related to a "formalist" perspective, in that both are a consequence of the epistemological individualism on which his position is based. Given his fundamental assumption that all perception consists in a process of interpretation which is affected by an individual's moral condition, it is, as Ruskin is well aware, a consequence of his position that only the formal aspect of his interpretations of art can be generalized to individuals other than himself. Ruskin may offer specific interpretations but, like the Whitechapel exhibition catalogue entries, they should be regarded as the stimulus to a perceptual and interpretative labour which can only be undertaken by individuals for themselves.²¹

Barnett's characterization of pictures as God's "voices" implies a linguistic model of how paintings communicate meaning which is also apparent in Watts' frequent references to painting as a "language". Far from indicating a fundamentally narrative approach to art, however, these references to the "language" of painting reflect an epistemology in which painting, and visual perception itself, is conceived as fundamentally non-representational in character, in that there is no relation of natural "resemblance" between the forms of painting and the natural world they signify. This emphasis on the non-representational nature of painting reflects not just the influence of Ruskin, but the indebtedness of Barnett, Watts and

Ruskin himself to a model of perception whose most coherent formulation was set out by the Common Sense philosophers in their late eighteenth century controversy with David Hume.²²

The epistemology proposed by Thomas Reid, and other members of the Common Sense school of philosophy, postulates that all sense perception is fundamentally communal in nature, not the solitary experience assumed by Locke and Hume. In many ways, the Common Sense philosophical position can be understood as an elaboration of Berkeley's *Essay on Vision*, which suggests that we should regard sight as a kind of interpretation of the signs which God has placed in the world, rather than an apprehension of immediately intelligible sense-data.²³

One of the key analogies of both Berkeley and Reid is with painterly techniques whereby gradation of colour, for example, is used to suggest qualities of space, such as distance, which cannot be directly represented. Sight, according to Berkeley, is a kind of reading of the divine handwriting which God has left in the world, and the achievement of painters, Reid suggests, consists in learning to direct their attention to this "handwriting", the visible signs themselves, rather than to its content, the perceptual knowledge which these signs convey. The techniques of painting are a human imitation of God's handwriting, in a way which reveals that there is no natural relationship of resemblance between what physically impacts on our senses and what we understand through sense perception. For Reid and the other Common Sense philosophers, perception is fundamentally non-representational in character: perceiving is a process essentially akin to interpreting a language, although our habituation to this process means that we have a natural tendency to think of our perceptions as immediately intelligible.²⁴

Reid's argument that habit blinds us to the true nature of sense-perception as a process of interpretation helps to explain the important role I have suggested "defamiliarization" plays in the Ruskinian aesthetics of Barnett and Watts. Viewing paintings, for these Ruskinians, has the potential to be a revelation of the divine not because it is fundamentally different from other forms of sense perception, but because it testifies to sense perception's true nature. The very techniques which the painter uses to render the experience of vision make obvious the fundamentally active, interpretative role of the mind in the process of perception.

In this Ruskinian view, paintings, if studied closely, belie the assumption we naturally fall into, that sense perceptions are immediately intelligible: they thus have the potential to redirect our attention away from self towards God, whose divine language of signs our minds interpret in the process of perception. Through this shift of mental attitude, perception, instead of being a self-directed activity, becomes an other-directed activity, and so capable of morally educating the individual.²⁵

This view of perception as the reading of signs, which is characteristic of Common Sense philosophy, can be seen to underlie Ruskin's aesthetic position right from the opening of *Modern Painters*, particularly in the distinction he makes between "truth " and "imitation":

Painting, or art generally, as such, with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive language...

The word Truth, as applied to art, signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, of any fact of nature...

Truth may be stated by any signs or symbols which have a definite signification in the minds of those to whom they are addressed, although such signs be themselves no image nor likeness of anything. Whatever can excite in the mind the conception of certain facts, can give ideas of truth, though it be in no degree the imitation or resemblance of those facts. If there be - we do not say there is, - but if there be in painting anything which operates, as words do, not by resembling anything, but by being taken as a symbol and substitute for it, and thus inducing the effect of it, then this channel of communication can convey uncorrupted truth, though it do not in any degree resemble the facts whose conception it induces.²⁶

What indicates Ruskin's heritage from Common Sense philosophy here is the concern to distance painting from any necessary relation of "resemblance" to the physical world. Pictures, for Ruskin, can and should convey "thought" because the ability of painting to portray things is not materially determined.

Ruskin's insistence on "truth" in painting, which is defined in entirely non-representational terms, is coupled with a hostility towards "imitation", which is dismissed as a lower form of achievement. Ruskin consistently describes painting as a form, not of immediately intelligible representation, but of language: that is to say, a way of suggesting notions to the mind which does not rely on materially embodying or portraying them. However, for Ruskin the language of painting is not arbitrary or conventional, since its foundation is the divine language of visual signs which God himself has instituted in the world.

To describe the Ruskinian position as a moralized aesthetics is misleading because it implies that moral significance has been "bolted on" to a category of "the aesthetic" which is in itself independent of such considerations. Morality, however, of a non-specific and "formal" kind, is integral to Ruskin's definition of the experience of art as a spiritual emancipation from materiality. However unsympathetic we may be to Ruskin's account of art, it is difficult to deny that he is describing an experience which may legitimately be called "aesthetic", because his account rests on a theory of perception which is just as philosophically valid as the more familiar one associated with David Hume.²⁷

Even where Ruskinian discussion of pictures appears at its most sentimental, the "morality" it adumbrates is the purely "formal" one of a spiritual escape from materiality, and so should be distinguished from mere sermonizing (unless, that is, we are prepared to dismiss Symbolism, Expressionism and many other modernist artistic movements as examples of "sermonizing"). For example, Ruskin's claim, in Book Two of *Modern Painters*, that the expression of "infinity" is necessary to all painting, is not a "moral" he foists on to the pictures he discusses, but an integral part of his view of what painting is, and even in the often caustic notes Ruskin later added to Book Two he does not repudiate this basic point.²⁸

A similar point can be made about the Whitechapel exhibition catalogue entries. Borzello quotes a comment by Henrietta Barnett, about over-hearing two working-class girls discussing "Mr Schmalz's

picture of "Forever", in which she suggests that "the idea of love lasting beyond this life, making eternity real, a spiritual bond between man and woman, had not occurred to them until the picture with the simple story was shown them". Borzello characterizes this as an example of how the Barnetts used art "as a vehicle for the preaching of Christian values", but there is really nothing specifically Christian about Henrietta Barnett's interpretation: one might just as easily call it Shelleyan. The really important point for Henrietta Barnett is that the picture has suggested to the girls a way of transcending the circumstances which surround them, and it is this is fundamental to the connection the Barnetts make between their work in promoting pictures to the poor and their involvement in Poor Law administration and reform.²⁹

iv) Ruskinian aesthetics and Poor Law administration

The influence of Common Sense philosophy can also be seen in the Barnetts' thought about social questions, and particularly in their attitude to the administration of the Poor Law. The epistemological individualism of this philosophy, which insists that the intelligibility of the world can only result from an individual effort of interpretation, also applies in the moral sphere, suggesting that social harmony must be earned through the labour of individuals. This leads the Barnetts to criticize the institutions for poor relief of their day, on the grounds that they corrupt the poor morally and so lead directly to social disunity. Doling out unearned money, in their view, does the poor no favours, it simply reinforces the moral laziness characteristic of "pauperism".³⁰

Put like this, the Barnetts' views sound like the worst variety of "on yer bike" Thatcherism. Their individualism, however, is more sophisticated and morally relative than this, in that it prompts a critique of the attitudes of the rich, as well as those of the poor. In the Barnetts' view, the claim that social good must be earned through labour applies just as much to the rich as it does to the poor. Doling out money is an insufficient response to the problem of poverty, because it absolves the rich from their social duty to engage personally with the condition of the poor. Charity, if confined to the giving of money, corrupts the rich as surely as it corrupts the poor: indeed for the Barnetts the moral conditions of rich and poor mirror each other. Given these attitudes, it is not surprising to find Canon Barnett, towards the end of his life, involved with early Welfare State thinking, in the form of the universal state provision of pensions.³¹

In the Barnetts' writings on poverty and Poor Law administration there is a rejection of notions of spontaneous "benevolence" in favour of an appeal to a counterintuitive conception of "duty", whose insusceptibility to a utilitarian rational analysis is emphasized. One of the Barnetts' main objects of attack was the spontaneous giving of individuals, which they saw as merely prolonging the condition of poverty. Henrietta Barnett, in her memoir of Samuel Barnett, sums up his attitude to such doles:

To remedy such evils, a few people were giving thought and time, and many people were giving doles, doles which insulted the receiver as well as condemned the giver, whose charity cost him nothing, not even the self-control of a passing emotion...

Added to the indiscriminate giving of individuals was the injurious and

corrupting relief provided by the Poor Law authorities and charitable societies, offered with little consideration for the effect on the character, or the future of the recipient...

The whole system, if it could be called a "system", was wasteful and ineffective, but its worst result was its evil influence on the poor, who were taught to beg, to prevaricate and to lie about their circumstances.³²

It is clear that the focus of the Barnetts' interest was on the relationship which poor relief established between givers and recipients, rather than on the material aid which was actually given. This interest in the form of poor relief, rather than its content, parallels their emphasis on the formal process of viewing pictures and is accompanied by a similar suspicion of sensuous immediacy.

Simply giving a dole, as Henrietta Barnett notes, costs the wealthy nothing, "not even the self-control of a passing emotion". The reference to self-control is crucial, pointing to the impossibility of educating the poor to exercise the self-control which would improve their material well-being, when spontaneous giving by the rich testifies to a fundamental lack of any such self-control. The moral condition of the poor is simply a reflection of the self-indulgent attitudes of the rich who patronize them.

The Barnett's central criticism of dole-giving, then, is that it does not contribute to the development of "character" in either of the participants in the process, the donor or the recipient. As Samuel Barnett put it, "character is the one thing needful": the eradication of poverty requires an improvement in the moral character of the poor, in their capacities for resourcefulness and self-control, but this cannot be achieved without a corresponding improvement in the moral character of the rich. It is this development of character in both poor and rich that the process of poor relief must achieve if it is to be effective.³³

The Barnetts' criticisms of the existing institutions of the Poor Law are fundamentally anti-utilitarian. Although the purpose of poor relief is the material welfare of the poor, focussing exclusively on the material end at the expense of the process of moral development involved in it, as occurs in dole-giving, is simply self-defeating. In their view, the utilitarian concentration on material good ends up by defeating even its own limited aims.³⁴

The Barnetts regarded the benevolence of the rich as morally corrupting because of its fundamentally "sensuous" basis, as an immediate and unpremeditated response to the spectacle of poverty; as Henrietta Barnett commented, it testified to a lack of "self-control". In this context, and within the terms of the Ruskinian aesthetic examined here, the Barnett's institution of the Whitechapel Exhibitions can be seen as an attempt at an alternative form of poor relief. To enable the poor to view paintings is to enable them to transcend that susceptibility to sensuous gratification which keeps them poor, rather than confirming them in their sensuousness as monetary donations tend to do.³⁵

The Barnetts' belief that exposure to art would promote the poor's capacity for self-control can be paralleled in the writing of G F Watts. In an article on "The Present Conditions of Art", Watts suggests that "nothing is so likely to cure the wide spread of

habits of intemperance that disgrace the nation as taste for art and music generally developed". As I have argued is the case for the Barnetts, Watts regards art as assisting the mind to develop the ability to transcend material circumstances, and hence as an experience which by its very nature will encourage the formation of virtuous habits.³⁶

The connection between the Whitechapel Exhibitions and the Barnetts' ideas about poor relief is also shown by their more general interest in the provision of "recreational" facilities for the poor, an interest which they shared with Watts. Here too the issue of "sensuousness" is central. The Barnetts define "recreation" in a very particular way, as involving the active exercise of mental faculties. By this criterion, the standard amusements available to the poor, such as going to the music hall, are found wanting by the Barnetts, on the grounds that they are all characterized by the passive reception of "sensation".³⁷ The Barnetts' argument is that the poor need to be educated into the ability to engage in "recreation", by exposure to the more mentally demanding forms of high art. This kind of education in "recreation" is necessary to enable the poor to benefit from nature itself. Merely conveying the poor into the countryside is not enough, since without educational preparation the visit will be merely one more passively absorbed "sensation": what the poor need is the ability to "read", or actively interpret the countryside. It is this kind of education that painting can provide.³⁸

v) The politics of the Whitechapel exhibitions

In this account of the interrelationship between the Barnetts' Ruskinian aesthetics, their attitudes towards poor relief and their advocacy of the value of recreation, the central role played in their thought by an appeal to mental "activity" has been emphasized. In conclusion, I would like to address the question of the political function the Barnetts envisaged for art. Although I have suggested that an interpretation of the Whitechapel exhibitions which characterizes them as simple propaganda for "Victorian values" is too reductive, I think it is still possible to identify an ideological project behind the exhibitions.

That ideological project is the promotion of individualism among the poor. The Barnetts regard viewing pictures as an interpretive process which requires mental labour on the part of individuals; in this, it is unlike the amusements which are normally offered to the poor even by philanthropists, which require nothing more than the passive absorption of sensations. In a similar way, the Barnetts reject the model of charity as passive absorption by the poor of benevolent "doles" by the rich in favour of requiring the poor, where possible, actively to earn poor relief.³⁹

The individualism underlying the Barnetts' Ruskinian aesthetics is thus present both at an epistemological and at a social level. Truly educative kinds of art require a willed act of attention on the part of the individual as a precondition of their intelligibility: the viewer must move beyond the sensuous immediacy of the painting's surface in order to interpret the signs by which it represents the world. This requirement is paralleled at the level of social action: true charity to the poor consists in moving

beyond the sensuous immediacy of spontaneous giving through an act of will in which social appearances are interrogated in order to arrive at the underlying moral principles of society. For the Bernetts, just as painting implies that both painter and viewer must learn to recognize their immediate sensations as signs of realities outside themselves, so too any attempt to engage in poor relief must involve both giver and recipient in questioning their immediate responses: without this interpretative labour on the part of individuals, poor relief must end up merely reproducing the existing social situation which is responsible for the phenomenon of "pauperism".⁴⁰

What happens in the interpretive process of viewing a picture is thus for the Bernetts essentially the same as what should be happening in social processes of poor relief. The converse of this is also true: the degeneration of poor relief into "sensationalism" which the Bernetts on many occasions deplored has its parallel in the danger of painting degenerating into mere "imitation" to which Ruskin points in *Modern Painters*. This degenerative threat, like the Bernetts' Ruskinian individualism, is at once an epistemological and a social condition. "Sensationalism" is a state in which, as in Humean epistemology, the immediacy of sensation is the sole reality; for the Bernetts this correlates with "pauperism", as a tendency to look no further than immediate gratification (though they would add that this also describes the condition of the rich).⁴¹

Within the Bernetts' Ruskinian vocabulary, "individualism" and "sensationalism" are opposites, a distinction which reflects the union of epistemological and social categories in their thinking. The immersion in sensuous immediacy implied by "sensationalism" reflects a social condition in which the individual is unreflectingly submerged in the crowd. This connection becomes particularly clear in S A Barnett's 1886 article "Sensationalism in Social Reform". Barnett takes issue with the Victorian equivalent of "sound-bite culture", which he sees as increasingly characteristic of the charitable associations of his day:

Strong statements can hardly be fair statements, and loud statements can rarely be exhaustively accurate...Party spirit...inspires those who hold even grand beliefs and support great causes, the height and depth and breadth of which they have had neither the time nor will to measure; and the spirit degrades their character. It is not a gain to a man to be a Christian or a Liberal if by so doing he becomes certain that there is no right nor truth on the side of a Mohammedan or a Tory. He has not, that is, risen to the height of his character: rather, as Mr. Coleridge says, "He who begins by loving Christianity better than the truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all."⁴²

Barnett here associates sensationalism with party spirit and, ultimately, with selfishness, in a way which is very revealing about the ideological project behind the Whitechapel exhibitions. Later on in the same article, Barnett suggests that the impatience and short-termism characteristic of charitable "sensationalism", instead of narrowing the class divide, in fact deepen it. An emphasis on immediately apparent change implies "the belief that things done *for* people are more effective than things done *with* them." But this is to neglect the development of character, with the result that the poor become as impatient and short-termist as the charitable organisations that are ostensibly serving them:

All suffering and much sin are laid at the doors of the rich, and speakers are approved who say that if by any means property could be more equally shared, more happiness and virtue would follow. Schemes, therefore, which offer such means, are welcomed almost without inquiry...Scamps and idlers come forward with cries which get popular support, and the mass of the poor now cherish such a jealous disposition that, were they suddenly to inherit the place of the richer classes, they would inherit their vices also, and make a state of society in no way better than at present.⁴³

The corollary of charitable "sensationalism", the failure to move beyond immediate appearances, is a threatening political radicalism on the part of the poor. As in his analysis of dole-giving, Barnett sees the failure to develop "character", the capacity for self-control and long-term thinking, as resulting in a breakdown of the relationship between rich and poor. Political radicalism, however, is for Barnett ineffective in just the same way as short-termist charity: it merely ends up reproducing the social structures whose effects it intends to alleviate. Once again in Barnett's view the conditions of poor and rich mirror each other, both being manifestations of a common "sensationalism".

The connection the Barnetts make between "sensationalism" and the socially divisive forces of selfishness and party-spirit explains their hostility to popular forms of entertainment (essentially "sensationalist", in the Barnetts' view) and their insistence on promoting high culture to the poor. Ultimately, the Barnetts seem to have thought that the kind of exposure to high culture represented by the Whitechapel exhibitions would prevent the formation of specifically working-class forms of political organization, which they regarded as inherently socially divisive. Hostility to working-class political organization is clearly apparent in Samuel Barnett's attitudes to trade-unions, which he regards as organized forms of selfishness.⁴⁴

The Barnetts' thinking is characteristically even-handed: "sensationalism" is regarded as leading both to political radicalism among the poor and, among the wealthier classes, to self-serving charitable associations whose only real aim is to promote their own organization. Nevertheless, the Barnetts regard the high culture of the Whitechapel exhibitions as intrinsically preferable to popular culture, in a way that makes clear the ideological and class-based nature of their Ruskinian aesthetics. What is ideological about the Whitechapel exhibitions is not fundamentally the content of individual pictures or their catalogue descriptions, but the Barnetts' founding assumption that the viewing of pictures is intrinsically linked to values, at once social and aesthetic, of "disinterestedness".⁴⁵

For the Barnetts, art, and high culture generally, promote disinterestedness because they create the possibility of freedom from the determining influence of the environment in a way that popular forms of entertainment cannot. The passive absorption of sensation which they find characteristic of popular culture subsumes the individual in their environment. The interpretative labour required by art, on the other hand, develops the individual's capacity to detach themselves from the immediate influence of their environment, and so ultimately tends to make the individual into a citizen capable of disinterested political action.

The Barnetts arrive at this conclusion about the social function of art on the basis of epistemological considerations about the forms of experience available to the poor. They constantly stress in their writing on recreation the narrowness of the range of experience usually available to the poor, and consistently suggest that the narrowness of their experience accounts for the poor's selfish tendency to merely sensuous forms of self-gratification (among which they class popular forms of entertainment).⁴⁶

It is important to stress that the Barnetts do not regard the poor as intrinsically selfish: they link the poor's sensuality with their selfishness on epistemological grounds, because in their view self-centredness is inherent in a merely sensuous mode of apprehending the world. David Hume's account of the effect of the association of ideas in reconciling us to our surroundings helps to explain the connection the Barnetts make between the poor's experiential narrowness and their tendency toward selfishness. It is appropriate to employ Hume's sensationalist epistemology because from the Barnetts' Ruskinian point of view it describes (and is symptomatic of) a certain condition of mind, though it would not be seen as applicable to all forms of experience.⁴⁷

No matter how inherently unpleasant our surroundings are, Hume suggests, we gradually come to take pleasure in them because they become associated with the idea of self (which for Hume is always pleasing). From the Barnetts' viewpoint, one can see that the narrowness of the poor's experience merely accelerates this natural tendency. The poor tend to be selfish and sensual because they experience so little that is not immediately connected with the self.⁴⁸

Art, then, for the Barnetts, can fulfil an important social function through its ability to convey ideas which are not immediately connected with the self. As Samuel Barnett comments:

The admiration of beautiful things will not, we know, keep men from being selfish and sensual, but neither is there any other nostrum which by itself will cure evil. Until people are conscious of all that is within them they have not fulness of life, or in other words, eternal life...Ideas have not reached the minds of the masses through books; pictures, if they could be more generally shown in churches and in public buildings, on Sundays and week-days, would educate people so that they might realise the extent and meaning of the past, the beauty of nature, and the substance of hope.⁴⁹

Beauty is not by itself a remedy for mental acquiescence in passive sensuousness, since the mind can only rouse itself from this condition through its own efforts. What pictures can do, according to Barnett, is furnish "the minds of the masses" with "ideas" which will help them in their moral struggle against the tendency to selfishness.

Barnett's remark echoes Ruskin's claim that the measure of great art is the number of ideas it manages to express. Both Barnett and Ruskin seem to be using the word "idea" in a quasi-Platonic or Coleridgean sense, for a conception that transcends the material world, and it is this non-material sense which underpins Barnett's suggestion that ideas are a remedy against selfishness.⁵⁰

In Barnett's terms, the non-material "ideas" which paintings are

able to convey, assist the poor in moving from the "passive" psychological and epistemological regime described by Hume to the "active" one to which Ruskin and the Common Sense philosophers appeal, because they counteract the influence of association over the mind. The non-material nature of the "ideas" which art expresses prevents their being combined through association with the otherwise wholly material ideas with which the poor are usually presented, and so provide a counterweight to the exclusive self-interest which is naturally inherent in the only ideas with which the poor are normally conversant.

"Association", of course, is a word which has both epistemological and social meanings. To suggest, as Barnett does, that the "ideas" which art conveys cannot be assimilated into the "associations" of the poor is also to suggest that these "ideas" will prevent the development of specifically working-class forms of political organization. The politics of the Barnetts' Whitechapel exhibitions can thus be seen to be fundamentally akin to Arnold's prescription of culture as a remedy for social anarchy. The ideas conveyed by art will assist in the development of a "best self", a source of authority internal to the individual but located in a sphere beyond the immediacies of practical politics.⁵¹

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Shelagh Wilson for giving me some very helpful references, and Colin Trodd for suggesting I look at the writings of G F Watt.

1. cf Eagleton, Terry (1990) *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Blackwell, Oxford, p 3; Borzello, Frances (1980) "Pictures for the People", in Nadel, Ira Bruce & Schwarzbach, F S (eds), *Victorian Artists and the City: a collection of critical essays*, Pergamon Press, New York & Oxford 1980, pp 30-40. Borzello has published a later book (Borzello, Frances (1987), *Civilising Caliban: the Misuse of Art 1875-1980*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London) which I have been unable to consult. Judging from the title, however, if this book includes material on the Barnetts, it probably pursues the same line of interpretation.

2. Pater read Hume, among many other philosophers. Hume's influence on the famous Conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is discussed by Billie Andrew Inman in "The Intertextual Context of Walter Pater's "Conclusion"" in Dodd, Philip (1981), ed, *Walter Pater: an imaginative sense of fact*, Cass, London, pp 16-21

3. Landow, George (1971), *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp 95-96 (cited in Dowling, Linda (1996), *The Vulgarization of Art: the Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville & London, p 35); Grave, S A (1960) *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp 11-12

4. Linda M Austin discusses Ruskin's assimilation of viewing art to labour in *The Practical Ruskin: economics and audience in the late work*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London 1991, pp 54-59, though she doesn't make the connection with Common Sense philosophy; Barnett, H O (1921), *Canon Barnett: his Life, Work, and Friends*, Murray, London, p 84, pp 621-622; p 550; Barnett, H O (1882), "Passionless Reformers", *Fortnightly Review*, vol 32 (ns), pp 226-233, p 227

5. Whistler's comment that his use of the word "nocturne" implies that a painting is "an arrangement of line, form and colour first", and divests "the picture of any outside anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it" strongly suggests that it is a picture's immediate sensuous qualities which he sees as being of most importance: Whistler, cited in Merrill, Linda, (1992), *A Pot of Paint: aesthetics on trial in Whistler v Ruskin*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington & London, p 144

6. Ruskin, John (1903-1912), *Works* ed E T Cook & Alexander Wedderburn, Allan, London Vol 4 pp 35-36. What Ruskin dislikes about the word "aesthetic" is its etymological link to the senses, a reservation which is highly significant in view of my argument that Ruskinian aesthetics is based on a model of perception as a process of active interpretation rather than passive sensuous reception.

7. Borzello, op cit p 34; 36

8. Barnett, H O, (1886) "The Poverty of the Poor", *National Review*, July 1886, reprinted in Barnett, Rev and Mrs Samuel A, (1888) *Practicable Socialism*, Longmans, Green & Co, London, passim; Borzello, op cit, p 36

9. Ruskin, op cit, Vol 10, pp 190-195; Vol 5, pp 356-359

10. Barnett, Canon S A & Mrs H O (1909), *Towards Social Reform*, Fisher Unwin, London p 230, 291; Ruskin, op cit, vol 29 p 160. Ruskin's remark about Whistler (in Letter 79 of *Fors Clavigera*) occurs in the context of a discussion of whether money constitutes the sole motivation for work.

11. cf Barnett, H O (1882), "Passionless Reformers", *Fortnightly Review*, vol 32 (ns), pp 226-233

12. Borzello, op cit, pp 34-35

13. The catalogue entry would not necessarily have been written by one of the Bernetts. Henrietta Barnett describes in her memoir (Barnett, H O (1921), *Canon Barnett: his Life, Work, and Friends*, Murray, London, p 552) how a number of helpers were involved in the production of the catalogues. Borzello, however, takes this entry as exemplifying the Bernetts "ideology".

14. Borzello, op cit, p 36, citing Barnett, H O (1883)

"Pictures for the People", *Cornhill Magazine*, vol 47, pp 344-352, p 350

15. Borzello, *op cit* p 36

16. Watts, G F (1912), *Writings*, Macmillan, London, p 260

17. Watts, *op cit*, pp 19-20, 27-28, 32-35

18. cf Barnett, S A & H O, (1909) *Towards Social Reform*, Fisher Unwin, London pp 289-295

19. Barnett, H O (1921), *Canon Barnett: his Life, Work, and Friends*, Murray, London, p 544

20. Barnett, S A & H O (1915) *Practicable Socialism* (new series), London, pp 5-8; Watts, *op cit*, p 232 - the use of symbols from all religious traditions in the Watts Chapel is described in Gould, Veronica Franklin (n d; 1993?) *The Watts Chapel: an arts and crafts memorial*, Veronica Franklin Gould, Compton; Baudelaire, Charles (1992) *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans Charvet, P E, Penguin, Harmondsworth, pp 111-112

21. Ruskin, *op cit*, vol 3 p 109, vol 4 p 49; vol 3, p 107. The epistemological individualism characteristic of Ruskin's criticism is clearly apparent in his claim that "no man ever painted, or ever will paint, well, anything but what he has early and long seen, early and long felt, and early and long loved". Ruskin does not regard this assertion that artistic vision is necessarily unique to the individual as precluding influences from other artists, but comments that "it depends upon whether the energy of the mind which receives the instruction be sufficient, while it takes out of what it feeds upon that which is universal and common to all nature, to resist all warping from national or temporary peculiarities": Ruskin, John (1897) *Modern Painters*, Allen, Orpington & London, vol 1, p 130 Insight into the universal is achieved by the interpretative activity of the individual mind, which can assimilate the works of others to its own formative principles; if it is not transformed by this ability to undertake interpretative labour, any outside influence will only make the mind warped and derivative. Although Ruskin is talking about painters here, his discussion could equally well apply to the relationship between art criticism and its readers.

22. Watts, *op cit*, pp 159-162

23. Reid, Thomas (1846), *Works*, ed Hamilton, William, Edinburgh p 664; Berkeley, George (1910), *A New Theory of Vision and other select philosophical writings*, Dent & Dutton, London & New York, pp 78-80

24. Berkeley, *op cit*, p 33, pp 133-134; Reid, *op cit*, p 135; pp 127-128, p 134, 147

25. Stopford Brooke, a contemporary of the Barnetts, puts forward a very similar argument for the moral superiority of Wordsworth's poetry to Coleridge's (Brooke, Stopford A (n d), *Theology in the English Poets*, Dent & Dutton, London & New York, pp 91-97) Drawing on Ruskin's concept of the "pathetic fallacy", he argues that Coleridge's failure to separate his perceptions of Nature from the self, in the way Wordsworth did, leads to an unhealthy "morbidity", an absorption of all experience into the self. As we shall see in the following section, this is exactly the situation the Barnetts regard the poor as being in, and for which the Whitechapel Exhibitions are intended as a remedy.

26. Ruskin, op cit, vol 4, pp 79-82

27. Borzello, op cit, p 38; a sustained case that the tendency of many modern philosophers to discount the philosophical relevance of the Common Sense school is unwarranted is made in Somerville, James (1995), *The Enigmatic Parting Shot*, Avebury, Aldershot, passim

28. Ruskin, op cit, vol 4 79-82

29. Barnett, H O (1883), "Pictures for the People", *Cornhill Magazine*, vol 47, Jan-June, pp 349-350, quoted in Borzello, op cit, p 34

30. Barnett, H O (1921), *Canon Barnett: his Life, Work, and Friends*, Murray, London, p 626

31. *ibid* pp 648-651; Barnett, S A & H O, (1909) *Towards Social Reform*, Fisher Unwin, London, pp 174-180.

32. Barnett, H O (1921), *Canon Barnett: his Life, Work, and Friends*, Murray, London, pp 20-22. The opposition between spontaneous benevolence and duty is connected with the epistemological arguments about the nature of experience from which I have suggested the Barnetts' and Ruskin's characterization of painting in terms of signs derive. Thomas Reid produces a sustained critique of Hume's claim that benevolence is the fundamental moral virtue, arguing that this would restrict the possibility of virtuous behaviour to a leisured élite. For Reid, the dependence of benevolence on feeling suggests that it can only be practised by those who are themselves at ease. The conviction of duty, on the other, is not dependent on the senses in this way, and so is equally available to all, an argument which clearly parallels Reid's account of perception as a fundamentally non-sensuous process of interpreting signs. cf Reid, op cit, pp 584-586.

33. *ibid*, p 83

34. *ibid*, pp 621-628

35. *ibid*, p 20; Barnett, H O (1882), "Passionless Reformers", *Fortnightly Review*, vol 32 (ns), p 227

36. Watts, op cit, p 156; pp 166-167
37. Barnett, S A & H O, (1909) *Towards Social Reform*, Fisher Unwin, London, pp 291-293
38. ibid, p 299
39. One might compare the Barnetts' individualism to the individualism Oscar Wilde advocates in "The Soul of Man under Socialism"; Wilde seems to be referring to the Barnetts when he mentions "a very advanced school" which tries to solve the problem of poverty "by amusing the poor", and cites "educated men who live in the East End..coming forward and imploring the community to restrain its altruistic impulses of charity, benevolence, and the like" (almost certainly a reference to the Toynbee Hall settlement project which the Barnetts organised): Wilde, Oscar (1966) *Complete Works*, Collins, London & Glasgow p 1079; Barnett, S A & H O (1909), *Towards Social Reform*, London, pp 294-295; Barnett, H O (1882), "Passionless Reformers", *Fortnightly Review*, ns 32, pp 226-233, p 227
40. The union of epistemology and sociology represented by the Barnetts' Ruskinian individualism is characteristic of the Enlightenment thought which influenced them, cf the mixture of epistemological and political topics in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*.
41. Barnett refs
42. S A Barnett, "Sensationalism in Social Reform", in *The Nineteenth Century*, vol 19 (Jan-June 1886) p 283
43. ibid p 285
44. eg Barnett, S A & H O (1909), *Towards Social Reform*, London p 217
45. Barnett, S A & H O, op cit, pp 291-293.
46. Barnett, S A & H O, (1909) *Towards Social Reform*, Fisher Unwin, London, pp 291-296; Barnett, H O (1882), "Passionless Reformers", *Fortnightly Review*, vol 32 (ns), pp 226-227
47. James Beattie, in his Reid-inspired anti-Hume tract, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*, consistently characterizes Hume's philosophy in symptomatic terms, as the product of a morally diseased mind. Beattie's *Essay* was extremely popular, and his moralistic reading of Hume persisted. cf Beattie, James (1777), *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*, 6th ed, Edinburgh, p 443
48. Hume, David (1978), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed Nidditch, P H, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp 354-355
49. Barnett, H O (1921), *Canon Barnett: his Life, Work, and Friends*, Murray, London, pp 541-542

50. Ruskin, *op cit*, vol 3, pp 91-92; cf Coleridge, S T (1976), *On the Constitution of Church and State*, ed Colmer, John, Princeton University Press & Routledge & Kegan Paul, Princeton & London, pp 15-16

51. Arnold, Matthew (1993) *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p 99