

Christ in the everyday nineteenth-century
experience: examining a collection of
daily prayers and a painting of Jesus

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John Keble and William Holman Hunt produced work at the bookends of a century renowned for its scientific and industrial progress. Both men, professing a personal faith, sought to make sense of the presence of Christ and the significance of His death and resurrection in an era of fast spreading doubt. In this article, I shall discuss John Keble's poem 'Easter Eve' from The Christian Year, Thoughts in Verse (1825) and William Holman Hunt's painting The Shadow Of Death (1873). I argue that Hunt's desire for visual precision and Keble's ritualistic approach to prayer propel their shared belief that Christ was still relevant in the 19th century and could be encountered even within the monotony of daily living.



Figure 1. *The Shadow of Death* (1870-1873) William Holman Hunt, Oil on Canvas, "Image courtesy of Manchester Art Gallery"

John Keble, a member of the clergy, a Fellow of Balliol College and an associate of the Oxford Movement began writing *The Christian Year: Thoughts in Verse for the Sundays and Holydays Throughout the Year* [hence referred to as *Thoughts in Verse*] to inspire the nation's worship. The aim of his poetry was to bring together the sensibility of a time of 'leisure and unbounded curiosity'¹ with the mystic ritual of the liturgical year. What Keble didn't realise was the impact this poetry book would have on the wider church for generations to come. Anonymous editor H.M pinpoints *Thoughts in Verse* as the very conception of the Tractarian movement.²

Fifty-two years after Keble's first anonymous edition,³ William Holman Hunt's newly completed painting, *The Shadow of Death*, was shipped from its place of its creation in Israel to Hunt's studio in England. Hunt's journey to the Holy Lands represented a quest to return to the birthplace of the Christian story. Equipped with Pre-Raphaelite realism, Hunt sought to capture in his painting the verbatim of a landscape that had once echoed Jesus' voice.

Hunt paints a strong and youthful Christ with no physical imperfections. Keble writes of the 'silent corse, in

funeral fetters wound.'⁴ Both creators depict Christ differently, yet I argue that they are both attempting to achieve the same message. Both creators wanted to uphold that Christ was still relevant to everyday nineteenth century people. I will begin the argument by examining how both creators portray divine encounters that spring from the rhythms of daily life. Next, how Keble and Hunt redefine the domestic space for worship. And finally, examining how doubt and anxieties surrounding the validity of the resurrection are dealt with in *The Shadow of Death* and *Easter Eve*.

Keble's *Thoughts in Verse* begins with 'Morning and Evening' prayers intended for daily reading. Morning and Evening account for the first real *personal* devotion writing of its kind. It uses the model of The Book of Common Prayer as designed for corporate worship and repurposes it for the individual devotee. With two prayers repeated at the same time each day, Keble creates a daily rhythm. Every morning the reader invites Christ to be present with them. Every evening, the reader implores Christ to abide with them. Over time this routine becomes ritual, and in repeating the ritual, the reader experiences new revelations of Christ.

In Hunt's painting *The Shadow of Death*, Christ, in his workshop, ends his working day. Hunt writes that Christ has:

'Just risen from the plank on which He has been working, and is portrayed as throwing up His arms to realise that pleasant sensation of repose and relaxation.'⁵

The saw resting on its bench and the day's wood shavings scattering the floor, we are to imagine that this is the end to a working day like any other.

In Keble's *Morning* poem, the act of bringing the same 'familiar strain' of prayer before God each morning, 'ask[ing] and ask[ing] again,' opens up the way to 'finding a spell unheard before.'⁶ In *Evening* poem, the habitual fading of the sun takes with it the worries of the day. Moreover, the allegory of the absent sun reminds the reader of the presence of *the Son*: 'It is not night if Thou be near.' In these two poems, Keble exploits the cyclical, predictable nature of the day. He loads something as universal as waking up and going to bed with an innate sacred potential. The key to unlocking this potential is through ritually acknowledging these times of the day in prayer. Everyone and anyone who wakes up and goes to sleep can

therefore have an experience of Christ. Christ is part of the quotidian of all nineteenth century devotees.

In the same way, Hunt paints Christ in His everyday surroundings having just finished His daily manual labour. With the saw in the vice and the tools in their store, a nineteenth century carpenter would easily recognise this scene, and yet within the scene a miracle is taking place. The tools affixed to the wall were modelled on what Hunt believed to be the authentic tools that Jesus would have used.⁷ The 'authentic' tools become transfigured by the shadow of Jesus' body stretching in the evening sun. In this phenomenon, the shadow-cross draws together the human aspect of Christ in his human dwelling, with the Divinity of Christ. Therefore, Hunt's message is that within the daily reality of all Christian labourers, Christ is present.

As seen in this excerpt from *Morning*, part of Keble's ritual is to tune the mind to look for new 'treasures' each day:

If on our daily course our mind
Be set to hallow all we find,
New treasures still, of countless price,
God will provide for sacrifice.⁸

In Hunt's painting, Mary is distracted

¹ John, Keble, *The Christian Year: Thoughts in Verse for the Sundays and Holydays Throughout the Year* (Oxford, James Parker, 1866). p.A3.

² John Keble, *The Christian Year with Introduction from H.M.*, (Great Britain, A Mystical World Prints, Amazon, 2015). p.2.

³ According to Jr, Griffin. 1987. John Keble, Saint of Anglicanism (: Mercer University Press) p. 57.

⁴ Keble, p.57.

⁵ Cited by Anon, Victorian web. [accessed 13.02.21] <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/whh/replete/shadow.html>

⁶ Keble, p.6.

⁷ Natalie Davenport. 2012. 'William Holman Hunt: Layered Belief in the Art of a Pre-Raphaelite Realist', *Religion and the Arts*, 16:(29-77) p.33.

⁸ Keble, p.5.

from looking at the treasures in the chest by the sight of the shadow-cross on the wall. With Mary's hands resting on the chest, but attention caught by the shadow, Hunt captures a profound yet quickly unfolding moment. It is as if after years of Mary contemplating the gifts given by the Magi at the birth of Jesus, their symbolic nature is fully realised. The golden crown of royalty is echoed in the red coronet of atonement at the foot of the work bench. The frankincense and myrrh foreshadow Jesus' soon to be embalmed body. For both Keble and Hunt, a seemingly ordinary scene can spring forth an encounter with the Divine. The key for both is habitual contemplation.

The Shadow of Death depicts an imagined scene. It is interesting, however, that Hunt imagined that this interaction between Mary and the shadow-cross should take place in the humble, messy workshop and dwelling. Keble's *Thoughts in Verse*, being the new form of personal devotion, was by nature designed for the private domestic space of the literate nineteenth century population. Not only was Keble highlighting the sacred potential of times in the day and days of the year, but also the sacred potential of new spaces to worship. Keble was therefore inviting the population to consider that the presence of Christ could now be tangible in the home and not just the Church building.

Perhaps, *The Shadow of Death* to some extent provides the later nineteenth

century evidence of that legacy. Indeed, much of Hunt's religious painting traces the theme of Christ in domestic life. In *The Light of the World*, Christ knocks on the door, in *The Awakening Conscience*, the conscience is awakened in the living room. Both Keble and Hunt bring Christ into the recognisable, everyday domestic space transforming how and where people worshipped.

Beyond *Morning and Evening* poem, *Thoughts in Verse* follows the liturgical year with a devotional poem for each Sunday and for the days of Holy week.

“When tears are spent, & thou art left alone
With ghosts of blessings gone,
Think thou art taken from the cross, & laid
In Jesus' burial shade.
Take Moses' rod, the rod of prayer, & call
Out of the rocky wall
The fount of holy blood, & lift on high
Thy grovelling soul that feels so desolate and dry.
-
Prisoner of Hope thou art “look up & sing”
In thought of promised spring.
As in the pit his father's darling lay
Beside the desert way,
And knew not how, but knew his God would save
Even from that living grave,
So, buried with our Lord, we'll close our eyes
To the decaying world, till angels bid us rise.”

It is not certain whether this is the

very first draft of the *Easter Eve* poem penned by Keble. Keble often drafted and sent fragments or entire poems by letter to his friends. This was, however, one of Keble's earliest versions. The use of the short hand '&' suggests that this particular version was only for Keble's drafting and reworking.

On the bottom right of the manuscript, an ink stain suggests Keble's pen paused in a moment of reflection. The poem is after all meant to be reflective. In *Easter Eve*, Keble calls the reader to journey with Christ through the darkest hours of his death.

The verse begins by focussing on the lifeless corpse of Christ: ‘Around those lips where power and mercy hung, / The dews of death have clung;’⁹ Though the reader does have hope of the resurrection to come, *Easter Eve* provides a sort of poetic pilgrimage to Christ's grave. Keble's reader must totally mourn the dead body of Christ laying in the grave before he can experience the jubilation of *Easter Sunday*. Keble provides a cathartic space - Christ's grave - in which the reader can spend their tears, reflect upon the cross and be exhorted to pick up the rod of prayer and carry on. In these liminal moments between

⁹ Keble, p. 57.

¹⁰ NIV Bible, Romans 6:4 .

¹¹ Bown, N., C. Burdett, and P. Thurschwell. 2004. *The Victorian supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). p.173.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Carol Jacobi, 2002. ‘Mimesis, materiality and The ‘Shadow of Death’ (William Holman Hunt)’, p. 607.

Christ's death and resurrection, Keble allows an allegorical representation of the theological premise that believers are buried with Christ in His death before being raised to life with Him in His resurrection.¹⁰

In the years between Keble and Hunt's respective works, the threat of advancements in medicine and biological study fueled great anxieties within the Christian community.¹¹ The publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 questioned the scientific validity of the resurrection.¹² This scientific approach to matters of faith was groundbreaking. Suddenly, the tenet of faith with which Keble's readers accepted his work was now under scrutiny itself. This means that religious artists like Hunt were now fighting to defend the basis of their belief. Carol Jacobi traces Hunt's reaction to this debate in his letters. Jacobi argues that in painting Christ, Hunt was aiming to provide some sort of visual evidence for the case for Christ's historical reality.

In an age of religious questioning, the apparently precise visualization of an historical moment in Christ's life validates faith.¹³

Moreover, William Holman Hunt also had a personal preoccupation with

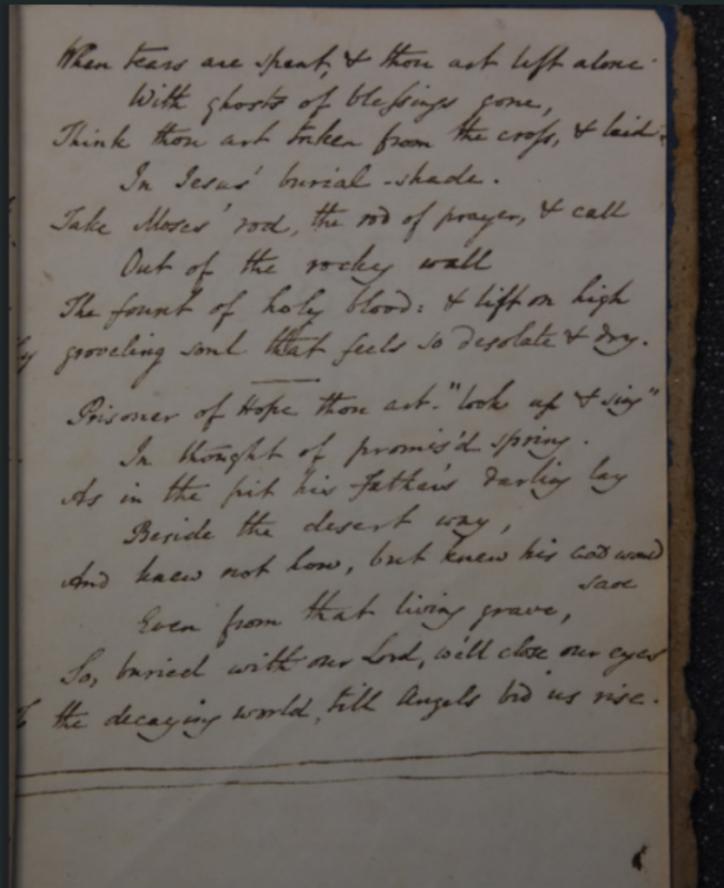


Figure 2. John Keble, stanzas 3 and 4 Manuscript of 'Easter Eve', Keble College, Oxford, [AD 1/KM HYMNS AND POEMS 10/IV] by permission of Keble Archive.

death and the frailty of the human body.¹⁴ Hunt wanted to depict a Christ who represented the picture of perfect health. In Hunt's painting, Christ is very much the living saviour. The shadow of death therefore represents the death that Christ triumphantly vanquishes, not as it seems in Easter Eve. This triumph is Hunt's main message. The saviour untouched by the lurking threat of death carries on his daily labour, satisfied in the work done and the promise of eternity. Therefore, Victorians are to live like Christ, that is, to rest at the end of the working day in the knowledge that with Christ, death is just a shadow and today is just another day in eternity.

Whereas in Hunt's painting, the Shadow of Death is just a shadow, in *Easter Eve*, death has overcome Christ. Keble asks Jesus, 'Sleeps't thou indeed? Or is thy spirit fled at large among the dead?'¹⁵ Keble openly confronts the theological doubts surrounding Christ's whereabouts in the period between death and resurrection. Unlike Hunt, Keble isn't attempting to convince an unbeliever of the validity of the Christian story. Keble holds in tow that doubt is part of the journey that the believer must take. This doubt is taken and buried with Jesus in the grave:

Think thou art taken from the cross,
 and laid
 In Jesus' burial shade;¹⁶

The shadow in Hunt's painting is behind Jesus. In Keble's writing, the reader lies within that shadow. What Hunt achieves visually, Keble takes one step further in creating a four dimensional experience. Keble's reader dies and lives with Christ. Keble's reader sleeps and wakes with Christ. Keble's reader weeps, prays and sings with Christ. For Keble, the rhythms of life, and every emotion and doubt it may contain are accepted as part of the journey to gaining new revelations of the spiritual realm on earth. Keble's supernatural is better defined as the *extraordinary* born from ordinary experience and routine.

The collection of *Thoughts in Verse* as a whole following the pattern of the liturgical year also means that, by nature, *Thoughts in Verse* is designed to be read and reread over a lifetime of Sundays. Rodney Edgecombe¹⁷ argues that postmodern readings undermine the authentic perspectives of those who experience *Thoughts in Verse* as devotional literature. For these readers, the text becomes no longer a text, but a way of life as natural as breathing. Moreover, the rereading of Keble's

¹⁴ After the death of his young wife and ill health according to Jacobi, C. 2002. 'Mimesis, materiality and The 'Shadow of Death' (William Holman Hunt)', *Art History*, 25: (605-621) p. 608.

¹⁵ Keble, p.58.

¹⁶ Keble, p.58.

¹⁷ R.S, Edgecombe, *Two Poets of the Oxford Movement: John Keble and John Henry Newman* (Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press, 1996) p. 35.

work isn't just aimed at finding new expressions of spirituality, but to fundamentally change the believer's way of seeing the world. Keble's mission is to attune the reader to find joy in the everyday experience:

Old friends, old scenes will lovelier
be,
As more of Heaven in each we see;
Some softening gleam of love and
prayer
Shall dawn on every cross and care.¹⁸

Keble also doesn't shy away from the hardships of everyday life. Keble simply redirects the reader to lay such burdens in the grave with Christ.

No doubt, William Holman Hunt was aware (and most likely owned a copy) of Keble's *Thoughts in Verse*. Hunt's circle was involved in Oxford and his patron Thomas Combe was a long-standing supporter of the principles of the Oxford Movement.¹⁹ The movement that Keble would father redefined the church. Hunt and his generation lived in the legacy of Keble's new mode of intercession that allowed for spiritual encounters. Hunt's own spiritual encounter happened in his vision at Ewell²⁰ and subsequently influenced all of Hunt's biblical paintings. The first of such paintings and most famous, *The Light of The World*, now hangs in the chapel at Keble College, Oxford, a monument

¹⁸ Keble, p.5.

¹⁹ Davenport, p.37.

²⁰ Davenport, p.33.

to the legacy of Keble himself.

In sum, Hunt's work tries to proffer tangible, visible evidence for the case of Christ's existence and resurrection. Keble's work offers a poetic pilgrimage to Christ's graveside. Both works stand either side of a volatile and controversial series of mid-century debate that called to question the doubts that Keble so readily embraced and that Hunt so fervently sought to dispel. Both men however were zealous in their commitment that the person of Christ held relevance to the daily lives of the people living in their age. Further, not just that Christ held relevance, but was accessible in new modes of worship and intercession within the domestic space.

Hunt paints Christ in his workshop, surrounded by the familiar symbols of daily labour. The perfected body of Christ in *The Shadow of Death* serves as a visual reminder of Jesus' paradoxal total divinity and total humanity. In Hunt's quest to somehow embody within one visual entity the two extreme and total realities, he takes something as meagre and recognizable as a tool store and transforms it by casting the shadow of Christ over it, forming the shadow-cross.

In *Thoughts in Verse*, Keble takes something as menial as waking

and sleeping to be transmuted into 'New thoughts of God, new hopes of Heaven.'²¹ Heaven itself can be encountered within the daily rhythms of living. Just like the material objects Mary contemplates in Hunt's painting, Keble's text, through contemplation, allows the supernatural to spring forth from the everyday.

²¹ Keble, p.5.