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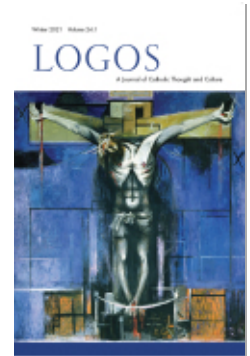
Objectifying the Unknown: The Catholic Art of Graham Sutherland

Daniel Frampton

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DANIEL FRAMPTON

Objectifying the Unknown

The Catholic Art of Graham Sutherland

Sutherland: A Catholic Artist?

IN AN ARTICLE titled “A Meeting with Graham Sutherland” printed in *World Review* in June 1949, the critic Robert Melville (1905–1986), interviewing the artist at his studio in Trottisccliffe in Kent, inquired whether Sutherland’s Catholic faith influenced his art. Melville’s question was prompted in part by Sutherland’s collection of books by noted contemporary Catholic authors, including Graham Greene (1904–1991), Evelyn Waugh (1903–1966) and, perhaps most significantly, Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), the French Catholic philosopher, and his work *Art and Scholasticism* (1920). Sutherland’s response to Melville’s query was revealing. Although his marriage to Kathleen Barry had been “the immediate instrument” of his confirmation into the Catholic Church in 1926, Sutherland had “found it quite natural to become a Catholic—it was like coming home.” He explained further:

The Church objectifies the mysterious and the unknown. It gave my aspirations towards certain ends a more clearly-defined direction than I could ever have found alone. It gave

me a conception of a system whereby all things created, human and otherwise, down to the smallest atom—and its constituents—are integrated. It widened and superseded my vague pantheism. It also gave me a sense of tradition and of being a member of society. Even now I cannot go into a church on the Continent without feeling a curious thrill at being present at the enactment of mysteries which are enacted in precisely the same way in practically every country in the world, often at the same time. The sense of the canalisation of thoughts and energies on so vast a scale dumbfounds me. As to the effect on my work—who can say?¹

Despite this statement here—a vital admission, it seems to me, regarding the relationship between his faith and his art—Sutherland's response to Melville has received barely any attention from art historians, although Melville's piece was reproduced in Martin Hammer's work *Graham Sutherland: Landscapes, War Scenes, Portraits 1924–1950* (1999).² The influence that Catholicism might have had on his art has remained largely unstudied. This article will attempt to correct this glaring neglect. What was the effect of Sutherland's faith on his art?

Sutherland, who in the 1940s and 1950s was recognized as Britain's most prominent artist, has been labelled a "romantic" or "neo-Romantic" painter, during his own life as well as posthumously.³ Edward Sackville-West, for instance, wrote in 1943 that "Graham Sutherland may justly be called a romantic painter."⁴ And "neo-romantic," a term employed by Robin Ironside and applied to Sutherland as well in a 1939 survey of British artists, has commonly been used to describe his work as exuding some manner of national feeling coupled with a sense of mystery. Indeed, efforts to define neo-Romanticism have, for the most part, settled on such catchwords as "moody" and "melodramatic," pointing toward a sense of "unlocated melancholy," as Frances Spalding has written; Sutherland's work, in particular, forwarding an "emotional attitude, dark, Gothic and intense."⁵ Malcolm Yorke's book *The Spirit of Place: Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and Their Times* (1988),

which included Sutherland as one such artist, assented to this view, that to be “romantic,” especially during the 1940s, meant seeking “to put magic and mystery back into things, and to turn the world adrift once more in a wild and unpredictable universe.”⁶

Yorke has also made the point that neo-Romanticism “responded seriously to a need for an art which would help us define our national identity when that need was most urgent” during the Second World War. Therefore, the road to war in the 1930s, but also the conflagration and vast bloodletting itself (1939–1945), which isolated Britain from the rest of Europe, led to a consideration of “national artistic identity.”⁷ This narrative has dominated neo-Romantic studies for the last three decades at least. Catherine Jolivet, for example, in her work *Landscape, Art and Identity in 1950s Britain* (2009), forwarded the view that Sutherland’s mural *The Origins of the Land* (1951) constituted a meditation on British national identity that went hand in hand with a sense of postwar anxiety.⁸ And the literature on Sutherland is really part of a far broader consideration of themes relating to national identity in the 1930s and 1940s. Recent works on this matter include *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880–1940* (2002), edited by David Peters Corbett, Ysanne Holt, and Fiona Russell; Alexandra Harris’s *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (2010); and Peter Lowe’s *English Journeys: National and Cultural Identity in 1930s and 1940s England* (2012).

While such studies undoubtedly have merit, the academic literature on this subject has by now exhausted itself. Moreover, viewing Sutherland simply through the lens of neo-Romanticism, pertaining in particular to national identity rather than theology, has served to obscure what I believe to be the true nature of his art, which, this article will argue, is essentially religious and especially Catholic.

Despite having attracted the label “neo-Romantic,” Sutherland’s work has been described before as being in some manner “religious,” though not obviously Christian or Catholic, as Melville thought it might be. George Shaw, writing in 2011, commented:

It is well known that Sutherland was a Catholic and much has been and can be read into that. But looking at his work and what he says about it, there is little evidence that Catholicism or even Christianity was high on the list of the things he was looking for. There is none of the zeal of the convert though he is clearly in search of, or recognises the existence of, something outside of himself. We might well define this as the spiritual.

Shaw views Sutherland's output as pagan, it would seem, especially such landscapes as *Tree Form in Estuary* (1939), since, in Shaw's words, Sutherland's vision was "almost pre-Christian."⁹ Yorke takes a similar view, arguing that, though Sutherland "could have been a deeply devout man in his private self," he was "a less than fervent worshiper." Therefore, Yorke downplays Sutherland's faith, asserting that his work was informed by the pessimistic "old cliché," which nevertheless "held an essential truth," that "God died on the Somme."¹⁰ Certainly, Hammer appears not to take "the Catholic reading" of Sutherland's work as seriously as Melville did in 1949.¹¹ And Rosalind Thuillier, in her two works *Graham Sutherland: Inspirations* (1982) and *Graham Sutherland: Life, Work and Ideas* (2015), has paid little attention to Sutherland's Catholic faith, especially regarding his pictures of nature.¹² In this way, the literature on Sutherland has, on the whole, followed Douglas Cooper's 1961 analysis of the artist: recognizing the role of his religion in his work, though only in relation to his openly Christian commissions, such as his notable *Crucifixion* (1946) for St. Matthew's Church in Northampton.¹³ But Cooper did not see much, if any, religious significance in the main body of Sutherland's output. And insofar as Sutherland's paintings have been referred to as "religious" by Shaw, they have been considered "spiritual," "pagan," or "pantheistic."¹⁴ Charles Harrison's deliciously glib line, recalling Sutherland's "sense of underlying religious symbolism attached to trees, thorns or *whatever*," sums up the prevailing "whatever" directed toward Sutherland's Catholicism.¹⁵

Since Sutherland's death in 1980, Peter Fuller has come closest to asserting the religious significance inherent in Sutherland's paintings, describing them as "haunted by a yearning for spiritual redemption." Even so, Fuller only referred to such an aesthetic in terms of "Sutherland's Ruskinian capacity to see in a pebble the grandeur and scale of a mountain range."¹⁶ Therefore, I question Shaw's claim that "much" has been written about Sutherland's Catholicism. Only Melville, it seems, has taken Sutherland seriously as an artist whose art "does in fact express a religious attitude." Indeed, Melville went so far as to refer to Sutherland in 1949 "not only as a great painter, but as a great Catholic painter."¹⁷ It is the purpose of this article to assess to what degree Melville was correct in this assertion. To what extent were Sutherland's works, but especially his still lifes, not only his commissions for churches, an expression of a specifically Catholic view of the universe?

A Turn Toward Modernism

In 1961, Cooper forwarded Sutherland as "a painter of international standing" who had "overcome the weaknesses which bedevil painters of the English School." Indeed, it was Sutherland's great achievement, Cooper claimed, to have evolved "a viable and creative fusion between an English vision and a European practice of art." This has been the view that has generally characterized studies of Sutherland and his work: an artist who reconciled a native English tradition with European modernism. Sutherland is not the only artist to have received such treatment; his friend Paul Nash (1889–1946) has garnered similar attention.¹⁸ It is not my intention to dispute this narrative. However, as indicated previously, I do want to argue that such a view, which has received considerable attention in recent decades, has led to a skewed perception of such artists as Sutherland and the supposed Englishness of their art, a view summed up neatly by Cooper: "Sutherland's pictures transmit characteristically English feelings: an attitude to nature which is ambivalent in its reverence, suggesting at

once fascination, awe, and horror; a certain fear of vast open spaces . . . a love of luxuriance and of the mystery surrounding the impenetrable; a pantheistic acceptance of the cycle of growth, fruition and decay." "In true English fashion," then, Sutherland persisted "in looking for inspiration in nature, in the objective world around him."¹⁹ Again, it is not my purpose to concentrate on, or even negate, Sutherland's perceived Englishness. What I do want to focus on is the notion, which has not been given due attention even by Catholic historians, that Sutherland reconciled modernism with Catholic theological precepts. In other words, Sutherland's Catholicism from 1926 onwards is not necessarily an incidental element when we consider his output as a painter of natural forms. Indeed, it may be that what we consider to be "neo-Romantic" in this instance—and I am now referring to a type of romanticism in the twentieth century that embraced the language of modernism as a mode of religious expression—might actually be indicative of a Catholic sensibility. Melville might indeed have been on to something in 1949.

Born on August 24, 1903, Sutherland studied engraving and etching at Goldsmiths School of Art in the early to mid-1920s. Under the influence of the draftsman and English Catholic convert Frederick Landseer Maur Griggs (1876–1938), he spent the remainder of that decade producing etchings that evoked an English demi-paradise that likely never was. Here, too, the influence of the landscape artist Samuel Palmer (1805–1881) is clear. Indeed, Sutherland would later reflect that, during this time, he was "very conscious of the English tradition and rather aggressive about it." It was only later, in the 1930s, that he became "aware that there was something going on beyond the English tradition."²⁰ Certainly, modernism had not yet appeared on his horizon. As for Catholicism, Sutherland's early etchings might be likened to what Yorke referred to as "the nostalgic Catholicism" of Griggs.²¹ If there is a touch of medievalism in these works, there is barely enough of it to suggest that it was anything more than a superficial hearkening to the Middle Ages—although his etchings would ultimately give way to a more supernaturally

charged vision of the landscape, a vision that was arguably far closer to a medieval—hence Catholic—outlook.

It was economic depression in the 1930s and the subsequent collapse of the print market in the United States that obliged Sutherland to take his art in a new direction. Of course, financial necessity was a key consideration for the artist, though it might be that Sutherland was already heading in a new direction. In his etching *Pastoral* (1930) (fig. 1) for example, we can see a development of interest in natural forms, which he would later isolate and refashion in a series of still lifes. The hollowed-out tree trunk in the right foreground, as well as the tentacle-like limbs of the tree farther back to the left, already indicate an interest in the particular. We should also note the three shadows in the center, cast by the trees; cubist-like outlines, it might be said, which would become a common component of Sutherland's later work.

The decisive moment for the artist, it has been rightly said, was his first trip in 1934 to Pembrokeshire in Wales. It was here, among the rough landscape of gorse, worn paths, and rocky mounts, that Sutherland escaped the pastoral paradise of Griggs and Palmer.²² Although in such works as *Pembrokeshire Landscape—Valley above Porthclais* (1935), *Western Hills* (1938), and *Landscape with Black Hills* (1939) Sutherland is still clinging to Palmer and the nineteenth century, his own voice is now apparent and gaining strength as he strives toward modernism. Sutherland's flat shapes, bowed and sharp-edged, which characterize his more abstract efforts as early as *Entrance to a Lane* (1939), are already apparent, and Sutherland would soon eradicate all signs of human presence altogether. In this sense, his work in the mid- to late 1930s, as well as the early 1940s, founded mostly on his response to the Pembrokeshire landscape, was essentially experimental, as he wrote at the time: "It was in this country that I began to learn painting."²³ In this way, too, Sutherland "wanted to make landscape at that time in general more self-contained, to make landscape more figurative than in fact it is, and more within the four walls of a possible canvas." And a large part of this learning process entailed

a move away from “the enveloping quality of the earth” toward the study of “self-contained” forms. Considering his paintings chronologically, this is very much clear.²⁴ For “these and other things have delighted me,” he detailed in 1942: “The twisted gorse on the cliff edge, such as suggested the picture ‘Gorse on [a] Sea Wall’—twigs, like snakes, lying on the path, the bare rock, worn, and showing through the path; heath fires, gorse burnt and blackened after fire . . . the high overhanging hedges by the steep roads which pinch the setting sun, mantling clouds against a black sky and the thunder, the flowers and damp hollows.”²⁵ And *Gorse on a Sea Wall* (1939) (fig. 2) does indeed represent another key moment in Sutherland’s development in his turn away from landscape toward what he would later refer to as a “vocabulary of forms,” forms that, “by their rhythmic relationship to each other and by their internal rhythms and character,” were “free more or less from their environment and then ready to lead a new life in pictorial form.”²⁶ It was around this time, then, that Sutherland finally turned modernist.

As Chris Stephens writes, “If there was a general tendency in Sutherland’s art toward the language of contemporary practice in Paris, the largest impact in the late 1930s and 1940s was unquestionably Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* and its related studies.”²⁷ The pictorial lingua franca of Picasso certainly appears to have possessed Sutherland toward the end of the 1930s. The spiked thorns in *Gorse on a Sea Wall* seem to have been lifted directly from the blazing lightbulb in *Guernica*, which, interestingly, the noted academic Anthony Blunt deemed “the major religious work of the twentieth century.”²⁸ As Sutherland, who viewed the work in 1938, explained in 1951, he was seeking to personify the “essence” of something “through words of the utmost economy,” just as Picasso had done “in his ‘Weeping Woman,’ by a deliberate method,” embodying “in his material the very essence of grief.”²⁹ This leads us to the vital question of what Sutherland’s own work personifies. And in order to best understand what Sutherland was attempting to personify—or objectify, rather—on canvas and paper, we ought to start with his openly religious works, especially

his first painting of this type: his 1946 *Crucifixion* (See cover), commissioned by Reverend Walter Hussey (1909–1985) in 1944 for St. Matthew's Church, Northampton. Here we can see how Sutherland made use of his newly adopted language of modernism to relate the most significant of Christian events, which he would very soon come to refashion, in modernist language of "the utmost economy," in a series of still lifes or religious icons remade and revitalized for the modern era.

The 1946 Crucifixion

Hussey had initially proposed that Sutherland paint an Agony in the Garden. That Sutherland preferred, instead, to paint the Crucifixion, a more overt and canonically arresting scene of agony, is not so surprising, as we shall see. Sutherland would later state, "The Crucifixion idea interested me because it has a duality which has always fascinated me. It is the most tragic of all themes yet inherent in it is the promise of salvation. It is the symbol of the precarious balanced moment, the hair's breadth between black and white."³⁰ It is clear that Sutherland possessed a developed understanding of the subject matter at hand: the realization that, as the English Catholic historian Christopher Dawson (1889–1970) explained, "Christianity began with a startling failure, and the sign in which it conquered was the Cross on which its Founder was executed."³¹ G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), the noted Catholic writer, summed up this paradox best when he exclaimed that "the cross cannot be defeated . . . for it is Defeat."³² Certainly, there was a theology of history inherent in the symbology of the Cross, and as Dawson noted in 1939, "The Christian ought to be the last person in the world to lose hope in the presence of the failure of the right and the apparent triumph of evil. For all this forms part of the Christian view of life, and the Christian discipline is expressly designed to prepare us to face such a situation."³³ It seems that Cooper perceived Sutherland's painting this way, too, explaining, "Sutherland's view is that, for all its visible horror and

underlying threat of extinction, the Crucifixion carries a message of hope: that the flesh can suffer and perish matters little, because the spirit within, fortified by tribulation, can rise."³⁴ In other words, this work forwarded a necessary message of hope for mid-1940s Britain. But how successful was Sutherland in communicating this message?

Unsurprisingly, comparisons with Matthias Grünewald's Crucifixion in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512–1515) (fig. 3) have been made before. Christ's contorted hands, emphasizing his agony, stand out in both paintings, which suggest his torture is lasting. Moreover, there is a definite sense that what Grünewald has actually painted is a corpse, not a Christ whose divinity is at least hinted at in a religious icon, for example, but a man whose body is already in the process of decomposition. Similarly, Sutherland's Christ, far from appearing divine, is deathly white and posed, just like Grünewald's figure, in a state of utter defeat. Indeed, the most visually striking aspect of Sutherland's work is Christ's ribcage, which, almost cracked up the middle, appears butchered; while the abdomen, though present, is sunken, as if dissected, lending further prominence to the ribcage. Sutherland was influenced by images of the Holocaust, we know, and the impact of such horrors is clear in Christ's emaciated form. It really is the dead flesh that is emphasized here, as Cooper remarked: "The corporeal reality of the figure is troubling."³⁵ While Sutherland appears to assert that the Word was indeed "made flesh," that flesh now appears cold, white, and deprived of divinity.

It is for this reason that Sutherland's *Crucifixion* is not entirely successful as an example of Christian imagery, since there is an awkwardness in message present in the work. For it is possible to read Sutherland's 1946 work as a principally secular piece—or what Philip Rieff has, for example, deemed a "deathwork"—entailing "an all-out assault upon something vital to the established culture," such as an attack on the belief in "a world beyond the visible world." Rieff cites "Han's Holbein's deathwork *Dead Christ*" as one such painting in which "the eternal life in Christ is negated."³⁶ Michel Quenot has taken a similar view, lamenting the Grünewald altarpiece itself,

where “only disappointment and despair are perceived, without any indication of a victory or a resurrection, thus depriving the Holy Cross of its strength of Life.”³⁷ Indeed, Sutherland’s *Crucifixion* might be viewed as the end product of what Quenot deemed the ultimate secularization of sacred art from the twelfth century onwards, departing considerably from the style and accepted canons of Christian iconography that, especially in the East, retained an essential continuity, hence stylistic consistency, which above all underscored the Incarnation and the fundamental divinity of Christ. Regarding Sutherland’s attempt at a *Crucifixion*, however, there are two important points that should be made that might serve to mitigate this secular reading.

First, as Martin Hammer has shown, Sutherland, as well as the artist Francis Bacon (1909–1992), his contemporary and friend, “shared an impulse towards a latter-day form of tragic expression, which could encapsulate the emotional and psychological impact of the [Second World] war and its aftermath.”³⁸ It would have been very difficult for Sutherland to extricate himself from the historical context of his own time, as he noted himself nearly twenty years later: “Having lived through the epoch of Buchenwald and the rest of twentieth-century violence and cruelty, it would not seem unnatural to find that one’s consciousness had absorbed and been touched by these events.”³⁹ While suffering and the brutality of man are indeed crucial to the *Crucifixion*, it seems that Sutherland was so inundated by a postwar sense of the tragic that “the promise of salvation” went missing in the work. This is understandable, of course, since it had become clear by 1945 that six million Jews had, in fact, disappeared. Disregarding this reality would have appeared, to a mid-1940s audience at least, to be odd and even dishonest.

Second, and I think most vitally, Sutherland faced the problem of creating an obviously Christian work that, in the twentieth century, would not appear outdated or what has been referred to, in our own time, as “kitsch.”⁴⁰ Sutherland’s commentary on his other great religious work, the *Coventry Tapestry*, is useful in illustrating the

problem he faced, since he admits it himself. *Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph* (1962), displayed in the new Coventry Cathedral, faced the same complication in terms of reconciling subject matter with the language of modernism, as Sutherland explained: "On the one hand, I was designing for a Christian culte with all the history of the Christian religion in art behind it . . . on the other, I was supposed to be doing an imaginative work for to-day." And he also believed that Christianity had been "associating itself for so long in modern times with an art of banal and empty sentimentality," which was "unlikely to tolerate new and vital conceptions" in the field of modernism. Accordingly, Sutherland was conscious that he was "attempting to walk the tight-rope." It is not so surprising to learn as well, then, that he believed it to be the safer option to depict overt suffering and death rather than a scene of superseding hope and tenderness that might err on mawkishness.⁴¹ This is likely one of the main reasons why his *Crucifixion*, not the Coventry Tapestry, has been viewed as the more successful work.⁴² And it does seem that his acceptance of Hussey's commission, on the condition that he be allowed to go straight to the suffering, was an instinct that was, in the end, proven to be correct.

Whether we judge Sutherland's *Crucifixion* a complete success or not, we cannot simply view it as a brief aside or curiosity that resulted in a few other religious commissions in the 1950s. Instead, we ought to regard it as the artist's coming to terms with the system of metaphysics, or rather the theology, that his art embodied. In other words, the image of Christ was an explicit and altogether canonical expression of the Incarnation, which, in Sutherland's developed lexicon of illustrated forms, had been and would continue to be implicit and iconographic. Indeed, I want to forward another reading of this work that Quenot would likely balk at: that Sutherland's 1946 *Crucifixion* marked a return to what Quenot deemed "the characteristic absence of realism within authentic iconography" that served "to emphasize the spiritualization which . . . [was] taking place" in the icon—as an image not only of Christ but Creation too.⁴³

The Catholic Context

When we examine Sutherland's art as a whole, including the church commissions, we may consider them seriously as a protracted series of religious icons invested with a newfound modernist vocabulary of forms borrowed most obviously from Picasso. First, we must note the definition of "icon" that I am making use of here, borrowed from Quenot: that "iconography is a theological art consisting of both the vision and knowledge of God. Neither art nor theology taken separately could create an icon; the union of both is necessary." For the icon, he explains, is "a window on the Kingdom," which "allows us to see both light and beauty from the invisible world that would otherwise blind our eyes." In this way, "the Incarnation justifies and postulates the icon"—but in a way that might also be made to point beyond the Christ figure.⁴⁴ It is certainly worth examining this notion, since we know that Sutherland had read his century's most noted exponent of this particularly Thomistic, but nonetheless iconographical, conception that goes beyond the image of Christ himself by revealing how Creation itself is a "window"—a theological tradition that was a key part of the Catholic inheritance, which I think Sutherland invoked.

Sutherland was aware of the neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain by at least 1941, as he referred to the Catholic philosopher when detailing an artist's ability to create a "form" that "will transcend natural appearances." "To quote Maritain," he wrote in *The Listener*, "such an art will re-compose its peculiar world with that poetical reality which resembles things in a far more profound and mysterious way than any direct evocation could possibly do."⁴⁵ Although Melville observed a copy of Maritain's 1920 work *Art & Scholasticism* in Sutherland's Trottiscliffe studio in 1949, it seems likely that the artist had read the aforementioned book much earlier—the work in which Maritain contended that art had lost sight of its higher purpose, which was "to carry the soul beyond creation."⁴⁶

Although Maritain conceded that the medieval Scholastics

“composed no special treatise with the title ‘Philosophy of Art,’” he did see that there was a “far-reaching theory of Art” implicit “in their writings.” This theory, which he unpacked for the modern reader in *Art & Scholasticism*, was founded on the idea that beauty “belongs to the transcendental and metaphysical order,” as Thomas Aquinas had emphasized in the thirteenth century, and that “the beautiful is in close dependence upon what is metaphysically true.”⁴⁷ The noted twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar would express much the same view when, in 1982, he referred to “the appearance of the [beautiful] form” as a “revelation of the depths”—beautiful only because, being “an indissoluble union of two things . . . it is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, and it is a real pointing beyond itself to these depths.”⁴⁸ For what we are essentially touching on here is what David Torevell has deemed the Catholic conception of the sacred common to the Middle Ages, which was founded on “an embodied experience of the sacred.”⁴⁹ In contrast, the Protestantism that emerged after the Reformation has been said to constitute “an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality, as compared with its Catholic adversary.”⁵⁰

Accordingly, a key part of Maritain’s 1920 thesis was that, because of this “shrinkage in scope,” art had suffered a decline, losing sight of the uniting, holistic, spiritual principle common to religious art prior to the rise of Protestantism and, later, the Enlightenment.⁵¹ But it would be a mistake to assume that Maritain wholly condemned modern art. Although he believed the “Cubist perspective” to be “diametrically opposed to Christianity,” it was at least “far closer to a Christian art than academic art,” in the sense that, in its “ideographical schematisation of expression,” it was at least “seeking in the cold night of a calculating anarchy” something that “the Primitives possessed, without seeking, in the peace of interior order.”⁵²

Maritain’s admission here regarding the redeeming nature of modern art is significant because it would have left Sutherland’s own modernist pretensions some room for maneuver. Rather than alienating Sutherland, Maritain’s *Art & Scholasticism* would in some

sense have justified his modernism, while at the same time providing him with a theory of art relating to his own Catholicism, which would have allowed him to “recompose” and “transcend natural appearances.” The advantage that Sutherland had, of course, was that, being Catholic, he was not necessarily “seeking in the cold night of a calculating anarchy.” Indeed, his Catholicism, and the philosophical unity that it provided, would serve to maneuver his modernism toward an objective, hence Catholic, sense of the universe rather than a subjective, hence modern, sense of himself.⁵³

As related by his biographer, Roger Berthoud, Sutherland was already “favourably disposed towards Catholicism” at the time of his confirmation, and after 1926 “kept on for a long time being highly observant of the ordinances of the Church.” Although he later felt claustrophobia and his church attendance decreased, he “never abandoned” the Church.⁵⁴ As for his religious character, a Dr. Deusser wrote after the artist’s death that “his deep religious beliefs and closeness to God moved me very deeply.”⁵⁵ The poet David Gascoyne (1916–2001), whom Sutherland collaborated with in *Poems 1937–1942* (1943), also thought him “obviously possessed of a faith which found an affinity with something expressed in my poetry, though he seemed unwilling to discuss this explicitly.”⁵⁶ There is also a story, included in Berthoud’s biography, of a Roman Catholic priest at St. Aidan’s in East Acton observing Sutherland praying during the painting of another Crucifixion piece—praying for guidance, he believed.⁵⁷ While Sutherland was not “devout” in terms of actual religious observance, the vitality of his internal religious life cannot be denied, although it does seem that, as Gascoyne noted, Sutherland was disinclined to express it “explicitly,” especially in reference to his art. However, what he did say was this: “Although I am by no means *devout*, as many people write of me, it is almost certainly an infinitely valuable support to all my actions and thoughts.”

There is some explanation for Sutherland’s guarded comments. First, as Berthoud noted, “Graham was not a great joiner.”⁵⁸ Although he established relationships with other artists, Sutherland did not

join any particular movement or artistic grouping, such as the Chelsea Group, for example, a likeminded group of Catholic intellectuals, including the artist Eric Gill (1882–1940) and the poet David Jones (1895–1974), in London in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the only organization of which he can be said to have been a member was the Catholic Church, primarily because of his marriage to Kathleen. Sutherland's personality was not well suited to partaking in the ordinances of organized religion. However, this does not mean that the worldview and theology of the Church did not inform his life and his work. We have ample evidence—provided by Sutherland and those who knew him—to suggest that his faith and his piety were real and “infinitely valuable.” Secondly, Sutherland's apparent reluctance to discuss this openly, even with Melville in 1949, may well be an indication that he feared the career-limiting effect of being labelled a “Catholic” artist in a nation that was primarily Protestant and, even in the twentieth century, anti-Catholic.⁵⁹

It may also be said that it was simply not in Sutherland's nature as a poetic painter to explain his work. Although he actually wrote a great deal about his own artistic process, in “Thoughts on Painting” for example, in the same 1951 article he also said, “I think it is bad for a painter to try to explain his work. He is using up energy which could be better employed in painting, or he is tempted to rationalise the intuitive workings of his mind.” Indeed, in “Thoughts on Painting,” Sutherland suggested that his work was indeed poetic, which he saw as being synonymous with a sense of mystery founded on religious acceptance:

If one duty of painting is to explain the essence of things and emotions, may not it also be a duty, sometimes, not to explain—but to accept? Do we need an explanation of the flight of a bird, or a flash of lightning? Do we need to be told why a rose is shaped thus? [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge said that poetry gives most pleasure when generally and not perfectly understood . . . [and] it may be argued that their mysterious music is actually enhanced by that obscurity.⁶⁰

Thuillier too has observed that Sutherland “preferred to retain a certain sense of mystery,” and his wielding of both Coleridge and Maritain spoke, I think, to his own concern that his art, as a relaying of what may be termed an ontologically Catholic and premodern universe, would not survive an overly cerebralized analysis that left nothing to the imagination.⁶¹ In this sense, Sutherland would likely have assented to von Balthasar’s cautionary note: “We can never again recapture the living totality of form once it has been dissected and sawed into pieces, no matter how informative the conclusions which this anatomy may bring to light. Anatomy can be practiced only on a dead body.”⁶² Sutherland took a similar view regarding the temptation to “rationalise the intuitive workings of his mind”—although he also added that there might be times when the artist could, “profitably perhaps, give a clue; and this is all he can do.”⁶³

Thorn Head—*Refashioning the Icon*

In a short essay titled “A Trend in English Draughtsmanship” published in 1936, Sutherland made the pronouncement that, despite being a “subjective artist,” in that he was “creative” and essentially a “poet,” he was still “objective” in the sense that he was “continually gathering material from his experience of physical things”—for “the subjective artist . . . cannot create ex nihilo.” God’s creation mattered. As we can see, Sutherland did not divorce “experience” from objective or external reality—although the great difference between himself and the truly “objective artist” was that he was actually creating, of course, rather than replicating.⁶⁴ Later, in 1941, he explained that his paintings were born out of “certain elements” in the Pembrokeshire landscape that left “a decided and permanent mark on my enthusiasm and on my excitement.” Such a response was, no doubt, emotional in terms of “the excitement connected with their discovery.”⁶⁵ Still, the excitement that was registered was nevertheless rooted in the real, as Sutherland wrote in 1951: “I believe that a painter’s vision must grow out of reality—and that the mysteriously intangible must

be made immediate and tangible.”⁶⁶ There are Catholic undertones here in the language Sutherland employs as well as its outlook, and he wrote similarly to Melville that “the unknown is just as real as the known and it must be made to look so. I want to give the look of things to my emotionally modified forms”—hence Sutherland’s noted use of “paraphrase” to create by “a substitution—by personification, by a paraphrase or a special way of putting things and emotions . . . enabling us to know more about their essence and causing them to hold more than their original meaning.” “If I have felt that I must paraphrase what I see,” Sutherland explained, “it is because to do so gives me a shock of surprise—a new valuation of things. As if I had never seen them before.”⁶⁷

This returns us to Sutherland’s 1946 *Crucifixion*, especially the “sense of underlying religious symbolism attached to . . . thorns or whatever,” which Harrison casually dismissed in 1981. As early as 1936, Sutherland had some notion of what he was attempting to achieve in his art. But it was the *Crucifixion* and the studies based around it that consecrated this understanding and gave it focus and theological assent. Although Sutherland would produce further “religious” works, including another *Crucifixion* for St. Aidan’s, the most significant aspect of this first work regarding the process of “paraphrase” is Christ’s crown of thorns; thorns that Sutherland would cut away and present, in language of “the utmost economy,” as a “stand-in” for the event itself. While his landscapes from the late 1930s and early 1940s possess a certain dynamism in both color and composition, signifying his embrace of modernism, Sutherland, as a sort of neo-Thomist himself, was undoubtedly at his best when he focused in on the particular—in part because he realized that the particular spoke, or could be made to speak, for the whole. We see this most obviously in his studies of thorns and thorn heads, which also marked a move away from the depiction of landscape in the mid-1940s, toward still lifes, of which Sutherland’s 1947 oil on canvas *Thorn Head* (fig. 4) is perhaps his crowning achievement.

As indicated previously, Sutherland’s delight at the sight of such

forms as twisted gorse, twigs and bare rock, evident too in *Pastoral* and its strange tree forms, had gradually led to a far more concentrated approach that led him to give up the clutter of the broader landscape. In this way, it seems that Sutherland knew as early as 1936 the path that his art must take when he praised the later pictures of William Blake (1757–1827), which, overcoming “earlier inconsistencies,” achieved “complete unity of expression” by being “so little adulterated with literary associations that nothing matters except the self-contained vitality which they manifest.”⁶⁸ It was not that Sutherland was against such associations in his own work; rather, he believed that it would likely benefit from a far more minimalist, and consequently modernist, mode of expression that was able to embody the essence of a thing, as Picasso had done so ably in *Guernica*. And it was Sutherland’s study of thorns, for the crown of thorns, which christened this approach, as he related in 1951: “I went into the country. For the first time I started to notice thorn bushes, and the structure of thorns as they pierced the air. I made some drawings, and as I made them, a curious change developed. As the thorns rearranged themselves, they became, whilst still retaining their own pricking, space-encompassing life, something else—a kind of ‘stand-in’ for a Crucifixion and a crucified head.”⁶⁹ Here we see the genesis of Sutherland’s adoption of the language of Picasso intersecting consciously, for the first time, with a Catholic understanding of the *whole*, which the thorn, the *particular*, might be said to personify in *Thorn Head*.

There was a prickliness already apparent in Sutherland’s work in 1939 in *Gorse on a Sea Wall*—the prickles of the gorse anticipating the thorns that would crown Christ’s head in 1946, although at this time they were apparently not imbued with any religious significance. Moving forward to 1959, however, the allegoric import of Sutherland’s *Thorn Cross* (fig. 5) is clear. The moment of transition was around 1945, when thorns had come to act as a “stand-in” for the Crucifixion. In the pen and ink study *Thorn Tree* (1945), for instance, the stem of the tree may be seen to impersonate the axis of a crucifix, a feature that was not present in *Gorse on a Sea Wall*. The

culmination of this gradual minimalization and focus on the still life or religious icon is Sutherland's series of thorn heads, including the 1947 oil on canvas *Thorn Head*. Here, the white branch on which the orange thorn stands imitates a crucifix, which is this time stood atop an altar-like base beneath; it is a "stand-in," yet, recalling Blake, the thorn possesses a "self-contained vitality." In achieving this, Sutherland substituted the awkwardness of the 1946 *Crucifixion* for the unadulterated language of modernism that had, as Sutherland said it would, come to "transcend natural appearances," recomposing "its peculiar world with that poetical reality which resembles things in a far more profound and mysterious way than any direct evocation could possibly do." And this is where Maritain's influence on Sutherland is most clear.

Of course, there is another reading of Sutherland's work, especially his pictures of thorns: that they exhibit a postwar mood of depression and anxiety, as Hammer has argued. There is some truth to this, no doubt. But as Sutherland wrote in 1951, "People have said that my most typical images express a dark and pessimistic outlook. That is outside my feeling." I think we ought to take Sutherland at his word here. And if *Thorn Head* is a "stand-in" for a crucified head, there ought to be, as Sutherland said there was in his work, an observable "precarious tension of opposites—happiness and unhappiness, beauty and ugliness, so near the point of balance," which "are capable of being interpreted according to the predilections and needs of the beholder—with enthusiasm and delight, or abhorrence."⁷⁰ As Sutherland explained, the *Crucifixion* interested him because it was "the symbol of the precarious balanced moment," which comes across especially well in *Thorn Head*, since the colors he employed—the orange of the thorn, imitating the orange blood in his *Crucifixion*, and the bright blue of the background—offset the brutality of the thorn and its auxiliary barbs. Still, Keith E. Anderson has noted a "significant . . . absence of any signs of hope in these images. There is no indication in the iconography of the resurrection and ascension or of the anticipation of the Eucharist." Moreover, he states "that it is not

until the end of the twentieth century,” and Norman Adams’ 1993 *Golden Crucifixion*, “that works which use the iconography of the crucifixion return to any element of hope.”⁷¹ Although these two statements are largely correct, the reason I have chosen to emphasize the 1947 *Thorn Head* is that this is the work where Sutherland, through his choice of colors, achieves a balance that does give the “element of hope” equal showing.

Thuillier has written that “no artist of Sutherland’s generation had such a strong relationship with colour.”⁷² Certainly, color is a vital constituent of his work, to such an extent that it equals and even emulates the certain meanings invested in particular colours within traditional Christian iconography. Noting in 1951 that “you will, perhaps, have noticed that my thorn heads have blue backgrounds,” Sutherland explained, “The thorns sprang from the idea of potential cruelty—to me they were the cruelty; and I attempted to give the idea a double twist, as it were, by setting them in benign circumstances: blue skies, green grass, Crucifixion under warmth—and blue skies are, in a sense, more powerfully horrifying.” In other words, “It is that moment when the sky seems superbly blue—and, when one feels it is only blue in that superb way because at any moment it could be black.”⁷³ And, as Quenot has written of blue in relation to traditional iconography, “The colour of the heavens par excellence . . . oriented as it is towards the transcendent . . . [blue] reduces somewhat the material quality of the forms that it surrounds . . . and guides our spirit on the path of faith of which it is the chromatic symbol.”⁷⁴ And it seems that Sutherland would have preferred to have used a lighter blue, as in *Thorn Head*, for his 1946 *Crucifixion* but settled for “a bluish royal purple, traditionally a death colour,” a choice that “was partly dictated by certain factors already in the church [at Northampton].” I think that Sutherland—who noted that, “from the iconographical point of view, I looked at everything that I could and made a point of getting to know things which I had not known before”—realized that royal purple emphasized death at the expense of underscoring the divinity of Christ.⁷⁵ In this way, too,



FIGURE 1. Graham Sutherland, *Pastoral*, 1930, etching on paper, 130 x 190 mm. London: Tate. Photo: Tate. ©The estate of Graham Sutherland.



FIGURE 2. Graham Sutherland, *Gorse on a Sea Wall*, 1939, oil on canvas, 62.2 x 48.3 cm. Hollywood, UK: National Museums NI. Photo: National Museums NI. ©The estate of Graham Sutherland.

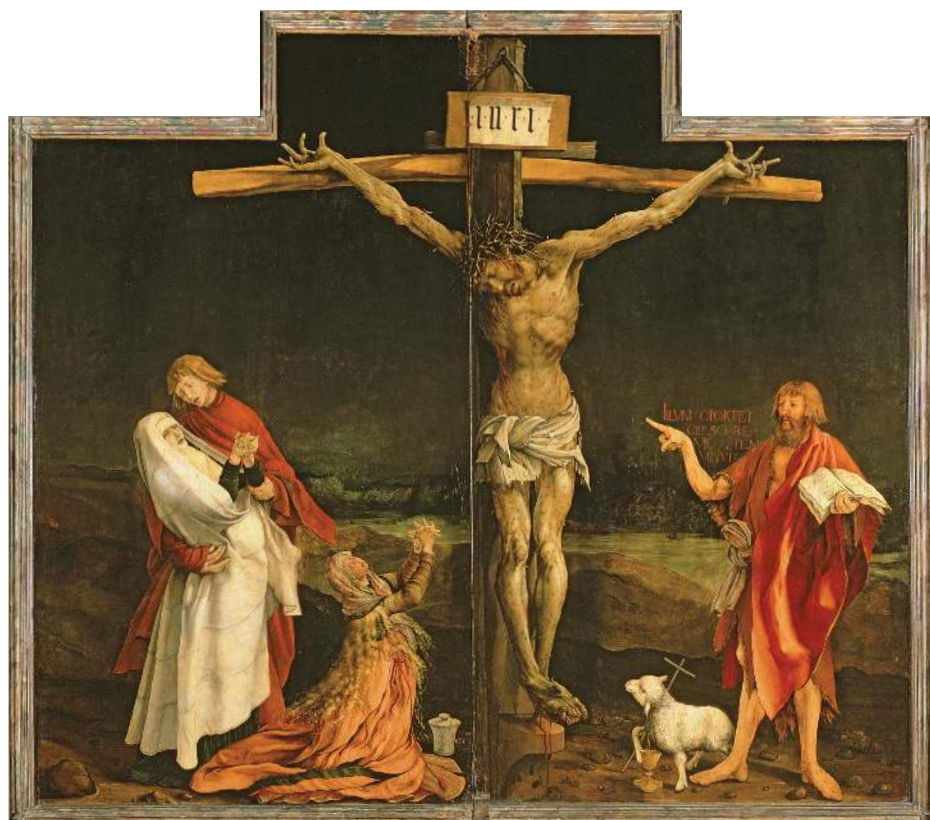


FIGURE 3. Matthias Grünewald, *The Crucifixion*, from the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-15, oil on panel. Colmar, France: Musée d'Unterlinden. Photo: Bridgeman Images.



FIGURE 4. Graham Sutherland, *Thorn Head*, 1947, oil on canvas, 40.9 x 40.9 cm.
Chichester, UK: Pallant House Gallery/Hussey Bequest, Chichester District Council
(1985). Photo: Bridgeman Images. © The estate of Graham Sutherland.

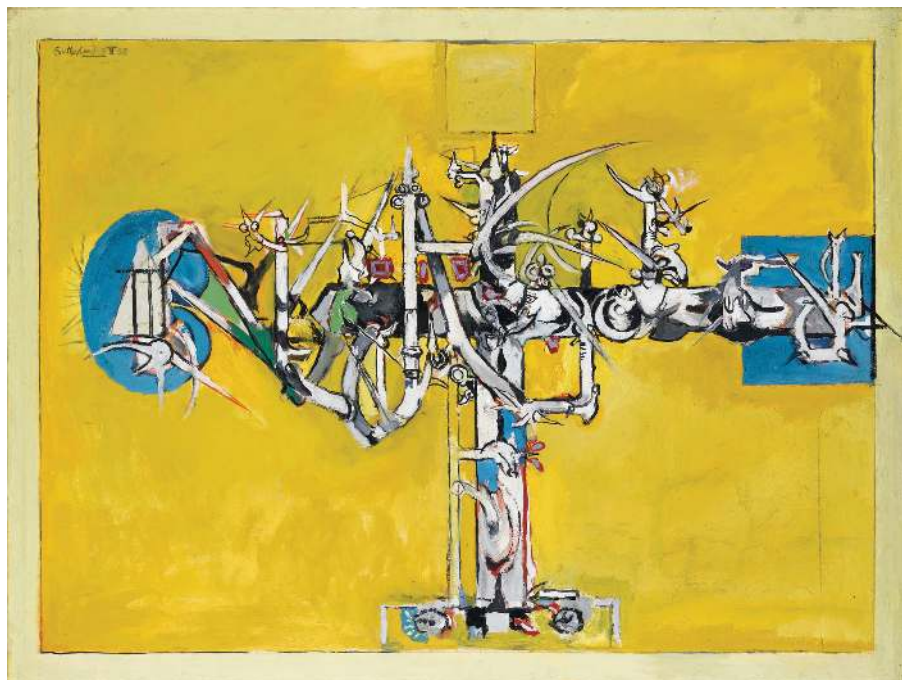


FIGURE 5. Graham Sutherland, *Thorn Cross*, 1959, oil on canvas, 99.5 x 132 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images. ©The estate of Graham Sutherland.

his series of thorn heads may be viewed as his attempt to correct, through the modified use of both color and form, the awkwardness of message present in the *Crucifixion*. And although his move toward brighter, sunnier colors from 1947 onwards has been attributed to his time spent in the South of France postwar, Sutherland was, in fact, moving in this direction already—in *Thorn Tree* (1945–46), for example—and it might be that his *Crucifixion* prompted this development in part, as he appeared to indicate later:

In my earlier work I used colour very sparingly: often blacks and greys and one colour. Then my colour began to lighten in key and I used quite a variety of colours. Critics have said that my colour became light (and acid!) after I started to work in France! It is a prime example of laziness of some of them; if they had bothered to enquire, I could have shown them pictures painted in 1944 which were very bright and light in colour.⁷⁶

This is not the only reason Sutherland's work ought to be viewed as a sort of modern iconography, meaning that its external "absence of realism" is of a piece with its inner "spiritualization." As Maritain reasoned, modernism had much potential in this regard, and such figures as Gill and the Thomist philosopher Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) concurred, as I think Sutherland did as well. In this way—taking account of God's creation and mimicking it and God in his godly "operations"—this was "the most solid ground there is for speaking of a religious art . . . because to be creative is to imitate, in a finite and analogical way, the divine prerogative," Gilson remarks.⁷⁷ The leap that Sutherland made, then, was to make iconography out of nature, to see it for what it really was. Though not pantheistic, Sutherland's nature iconography was certainly world-affirming, going beyond the traditional iconography of Christ while at the same time not losing sight of the implications of "God's Incarnation," which, as von Balthasar wrote, "perfects the whole ontology and aesthetics of created Being."⁷⁸ This also explains why Sutherland never veered off into

total abstraction. As he explained in 1966: "I don't want anybody to think that I am against abstract art altogether; but I do think that it should be totally a matter of proportions, intervals, and the sheer beauty of forms."⁷⁹ This echoed Chesterton's outlook in his book *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1933), one of the best popular works articulating Thomist thought, which constituted a rejection of "a sort of Platonic pride in the possession of intangible and untranslatable truths within; as if no part of . . . wisdom had any root anywhere in the real world." In other words, "Plato was right, but not quite right."⁸⁰ The vital declaration in John 1:14—that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth"—had made all the difference. It should be noted too that Sutherland referred to Chesterton as "an influence."⁸¹ And it is telling, I think, that when the artist John Caxton asked Sutherland whether his "paintings were made of two facets, flesh and bones?," he replied, "No, flesh and spirit."⁸²

It is for this reason that it is more than appropriate that we consider Sutherland's primary mode of expression the still life. As Gilson wrote in *Painting and Reality* (1957), "The kind of plenary satisfaction we experience while looking at a still life is due to the perfect adequacy that obtains, in this case, between the substance of the work of art and the reality it represents." Accordingly, "there is a sort of metaphysical equity in the fact that this humblest genre is also the most revealing of all concerning the essence of the art of painting," which Sutherland, I think, was also instinctively aware of as a "creator of plastic forms." Gilson also explained:

The things that a still life represents exercise only one single act, but it is the simplest and most primitive act of all acts, namely, to be. Without this deep-seated, quiet, and immobile energy from which spontaneously follow all the operations and all the movements performed by each and every being, nothing in the world would move, nothing would operate, nothing would exist. Always present to that which is, this act

of being usually lies hidden, and unrevealed, behind what the thing signifies, says, does, or makes. Only two men reach an awareness of its mysterious presence: the philosopher, if, raising his speculation up to the metaphysical notion of being, he finally arrives at this most secret and most fecund of all acts; and the creator of plastic forms, if, purifying the work of his hands from all that is not the immediate self-revelation of the act of being, he provides us with a visible image of it that corresponds, in the order of sensible appearances, to what its intuition is in the mind of the metaphysician.⁸³

Sutherland's finest still lifes, such as *Thorn Head*, indeed express that "simplest and most primitive act of all acts, namely, to be," as well as the artist's delight in it as a metaphysician. This may be understood more clearly in Chesterton's contrast between the "frightfully alive" eyes of the "Christian saint in a Gothic cathedral . . . staring with a frantic intentness outwards" in "astonishment" at the world—precisely because "Christian admiration . . . strikes outwards, towards a deity distinct from the worshiper"—and the closed eyes of "the Buddhist saint in a Chinese temple" who "cannot wonder, for he cannot praise God or praise anything as really distinct from himself."⁸⁴ This is why Sutherland's work cannot, and should not, be considered pantheistic, since Sutherland's work clearly looks outward, toward the world of objective truth, the world of eternal truths, rather than his inner, ultimately subjective, self.

Sutherland's admiration is evident throughout his oeuvre. Already we see this in *Gorse on a Sea Wall*, which, in 1939, anticipated his later concentration on thorns. What his *Crucifixion* commission did, however, was to consecrate and make holy that vision. Not only did the thorn head become an allegory for the suffering of Christ and the cruelty of man, it also pointed to the Incarnation itself, which is what all of Sutherland's landscapes and still lifes did, unconsciously in the 1930s and early 1940s, but rather more consciously from the mid-1940s onwards. Melville would by this time describe Sutherland's work as "an act of reconsecration," the most blatant indication

of this, I think, being his *Thorn Cross*.⁸⁵ For Sutherland, by the mid-1940s, could not look at nature and not see the Incarnation as well. As he related to Melville in 1949, his “vague pantheism” had been “widened and superseded.” And it seems to me that, in any study of Sutherland’s iconography, this should be acknowledged and given special attention—not only by secular historians but Catholics too. His thorn heads, though presenting us with a suitable point of departure, represent only the beginning of this long-overdue reconsideration of Sutherland as an artist of essentially religious works that exist within the Catholic, especially Thomist, tradition.

Conclusion

Berthold wondered how a man “so courteous, charming, urbane, delightful” could “produce work so spiky, [so] sinister.”⁸⁶ My article has attempted to answer this question: that, from around 1930 onward, Sutherland’s art slowly came to reflect a universe that was ontologically Catholic. Moreover, it might also be said that his art belonged to a broader development in the twentieth century that Michael Alexander has deemed “a second Medieval Revival,” which, unlike the first, “was consciously Christian.” While Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) “ventured boldly into medieval social history” in *Past and Present* (1843), it was the “social vitality” of the monastery, its system of governance, rather than “the monastic life of prayer and worship,” which impressed itself upon the writer.⁸⁷ And the conception of “Merrie England” itself, largely a response to the social traumas of nineteenth-century industrialism, generally had nothing to do with medieval theology or even, for that matter, Catholic liturgy. The likes of Augustus Pugin, John Ruskin, and William Morris, as well as the Pre-Raphaelites, are open to the accusation that they belonged to the “overtly reactionary strand in the English approach to the past,” a strand that was ultimately shallow and suffused with sadness, what has been deemed “the very English melancholy” of Matthew Arnold’s poem *Dover Beach* (1867).⁸⁸ Sutherland, whose early etchings were in

this way superficial rearrangements of a tired theme, was not given to bouts of existential gloom however. On the contrary, this artist belonged to a generation, represented most clearly by the Chelsea Group, under the influence of Maritain, which took a genuine interest in the theological content of the Middle Ages, which was essentially Catholic. In this way, too, Sutherland was a follower, but also an example to be followed.

Paul Miller (1918–2000), a student at the Chelsea College of Art where Sutherland taught for a time, later claimed that seeing Sutherland's work for the first time in 1937, especially *Red Cliff* and *Two Flowers*, “triggered off what amounted to a conversion experience,” in that “he alone, through his paintings and personality, brought me into direct contact with living reality, both spiritual and concrete.” He explained further:

I realise now that the Sutherland experience was the first—and most important step in my life towards finding God through imagery. More particularly, it was the discovery of the givenness of God's world, of its relentlessness, of its secrecy . . . Later through prayer: I have come to know God in other ways, but the Sutherland experience has remained a link with the external world to which we are subject from birth till death.

Miller's admission that Sutherland's paintings, and significantly not only his pictures of thorns, “completely transformed my approach to art by being far more than an artistic experience” is especially noteworthy, since it was, he explained, “a door through which I entered the real world.” Miller, who “was thinking about becoming a Christian at the same time” and had approached Sutherland at the school in Chelsea, also “became completely captivated by his courtesy, kindness and understanding of my problems.” “The fact that he was a practicing Christian was of enormous importance to me,” he added. Accordingly: “The moment of contact for me was crucial and life-enhancing. The quality of Sutherland's paintings and his beauty of

character saw to that.”⁸⁹ Miller would later enter the Church of England, going on to become Canon of Derby. It seems that Sutherland possessed a particular aptitude for investing, in Miller at least, a way of perceiving “the givenness of God’s world” through the window of the canvas.

It was von Balthasar especially who, in the twentieth century, emphasized the vital need to “possess a spiritual eye capable of perceiving . . . the forms of existence with awe.” An important constituent of this requirement to develop an “eye that recognises value” was the recognition of “the indissolubility of form,” which was identical with both beauty and truth. Even Catholic theology had lost sight of this holistic approach, he believed, since “our eyes lose their acumen for form and we become accustomed to read things by starting from the bottom and working our way up, rather than by working from the whole to the parts.” What von Balthasar was lamenting, then, was “our multi-faceted glance . . . suited to the fragmentary and the quantitative,” hence lacking “a vision for wholeness.” For this reason, he added, “Psychology (in the contemporary sense of that term) has taken the place of philosophy.”⁹⁰ And this has some relevance to the way we approach Sutherland’s work. For it would be a mistake to consider Sutherland’s work psychologically, meaning that we interpret it in terms of what it says about the artist’s sense of himself, unconscious or otherwise, rather than his philosophy and what he was attempting to reveal about the world. For it is certainly the case, I believe, that Sutherland, both the artist and the man, possessed what von Balthasar referred to as “a spiritual eye,” which, as Miller suggested, was also capable not only of perceiving but also of relating and converting.

If it is indeed the case that “art seeks to capture intuitions of the eternal,” as Anthony Giambrone suggests, Sutherland succeeded—his success being to embrace modernism and redirect it away from “subjective emotionism” toward what I have argued was a Catholic sense of order that could be communicated through the language of Picasso.⁹¹ We should recall Sutherland’s words to Melville once

more, that “the Church objectifies the mysterious and the unknown. It gave my aspirations towards certain ends a more clearly defined direction than I could ever have found alone.” However, while this direction gave his art purpose, it also isolated Sutherland, then and even now, which may account for the lack of attention he receives today.

First, we live in a world that has, as von Balthasar noted, lost its “acumen for form.” Academia especially has a “multi-faceted glance” that is not at all well suited to appreciating the religious, particularly Catholic, interpretation of Sutherland’s work. Second, Catholics themselves have, to an even greater extent, not taken Sutherland seriously, most likely because of his modernism. The Catholic artist Maureen Mullarkey has, more recently, criticized the failure of “Catholics [to] recognize 20th-century achievements in the arts,” which has served only to “hamper our ability to engage in conversation with our own so-called postmodern moment.”⁹² Despite the Chelsea Group and figures such as Maritain, Gill, and Gilson, there were also influential Catholics during Sutherland’s lifetime who vehemently opposed modernism. Evelyn Waugh, for example, who asserted that “catholicism is the enemy of Catholicism,” wrote in 1945 that “Picasso and his kind are . . . aesthetically in the same position as, theologically, a mortal-sinner who has put himself outside the world order of God’s mercy.”⁹³

Still, despite the evident neglect and marginalization of Sutherland, particularly in recent times, there is much we can learn from his art—and I hope that this article will go some way to redefine how we view Sutherland as well as introduce him to a new audience. For, if the eye can be taught to perceive “the forms of existence with awe,” I cannot think of a better tutor than Sutherland. Indeed, we can see in the progression of his own artistic process in the 1930s and 1940s that he developed a spiritual eye capable of perceiving the unknown and objectifying it in his art. Sutherland’s Catholicism undoubtedly played a perhaps decisive role in this “new valuation of things.”

Notes

1. Robert Melville, "A Meeting with Graham Sutherland," *World Review*, June 1949 (London: Edward Hulton, 1949), 62–63.
2. The inclusion of Melville's piece was dated incorrectly as February 1952.
3. Sutherland's notoriety resulted in his commission to paint Winston Churchill's portrait in 1954—though Churchill famously disliked the painting, which was later destroyed.
4. Edward Sackville-West, *Graham Sutherland* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1943), 13.
5. Frances Spalding, *British Art Since 1900* (1986; London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 129, 130, 133.
6. Malcolm Yorke, *The Spirit of Place: Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and Their Times* (1988; London: Tauris Parke, 2000), 15.
7. *Ibid.*, 33, 14.
8. "The *Origins of the Land* offered a presentation of national character as it related to the land that was not a linear affirmation of governmental propaganda, but represented an engagement with collective memory that neither veiled present fears about the future nor resorted to nostalgia." Catherine Jolivet, *Landscape, Art and Identity in 1950s Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 34.
9. George Shaw, *Graham Sutherland: An Unfinished World* (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2011), 17, 11, 12.
10. Malcolm Yorke, *The Spirit of Place*, 136. However, Callum G. Brown has recently argued that the decline of religion in Britain actually took place much later, in the 1960s, stating that, even in the 1940s and 1950s, Britain was "a highly religious nation." Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularism, 1800–2000*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.
11. Martin Hammer, "A Precarious Tension of Opposites," *Graham Sutherland: Landscapes, War Scenes, Portraits 1924–1950* (London: Scala Publishers and Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2005), 41. Hammer, in his own words, resists "biographical stereotypes [that] portray Sutherland as a practicing Roman Catholic, who lived in a pretty old house in rural Kent, and led a rather respectable and well-connected bourgeois existence." Martin Hammer, *Bacon and Sutherland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 62.
12. Although Thuillier does at least comment that Sutherland "always respected nature and saw things through nature. It was not necessarily always the visual power which gave him purpose, but rather the spiritual presence. When sometimes he was emptied of inspiration, he felt a physical nudge on the shoulder—a religious impulse. This may have been unconscious, yet I am sure the very non-realization of the fact created in him the energy to progress." Rosalind Thuillier, *Graham Sutherland: Inspirations* (Guildford: Lutterworth Press, 1982), 69.
13. Douglas Cooper, *The Work of Graham Sutherland* (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), 64.

14. Thuillier has also written of Sutherland as “amongst the greatest painters of Christian art in the twentieth century”—although again, Thuillier is only speaking of Sutherland in terms of such works as the 1946 *Crucifixion*. Thuillier, *Sutherland: Inspirations*, 69.
15. Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism, 1900–1939*, 2nd ed. (1981; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 323. Emphasis mine.
16. Peter Fuller, “The Visual Arts,” in *Modern Britain: The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain*, Vol. 9, ed. Boris Ford (1988; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 119, 127.
17. Melville, “A Meeting with Graham Sutherland,” 63, 64.
18. For example, see Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010).
19. Cooper, *The Work of Graham Sutherland*, 2, 1.
20. Graham Sutherland, “Landscape and Figures,” *The Listener*, July 26, 1962; also included in Graham Sutherland, *Correspondences: Selected Writings on Art*, ed. Julian Andrews (Picton, Wales: The Graham and Kathleen Sutherland Foundation, 1982), 78.
21. Yorke, *The Spirit of Place*, 109.
22. For an excellent description of the significance of Sutherland’s encounter with Pembrokeshire, see the chapter “First Pembrokeshire” in Rosalind Thuillier, *Graham Sutherland: Life, Work and Ideas* (Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2015).
23. Graham Sutherland, “Welsh Sketchbook,” *Horizon*, April 28, 1942; also included in Sutherland, *Correspondences*, 49–53. Thuillier has also noted “this exploratory feel . . . in the 1930s and 1940s.” Thuillier, *Sutherland: Life, Work and Ideas*, 6.
24. Graham Sutherland, “Landscape and Figures,” *Correspondences*, 81; “Welsh Sketchbook,” *Correspondences*, 51; “Landscape and Figures,” *Correspondences*, 80.
25. Graham Sutherland, “Welsh Sketchbook,” *Correspondences*, 52.
26. Quoted in Thuillier, *Sutherland: Inspirations*, 11.
27. Chris Stephens, “Graham Sutherland and Picasso,” in *Picasso & Modern British Art*, ed. James Beechey and Chris Stephens (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 173.
28. Anthony Blunt, *Picasso’s Guernica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 29.
29. Graham Sutherland, “Thoughts on Painting,” *The Listener*, September 6, 1951; also included in Sutherland, *Correspondences*, 70.
30. Graham Sutherland, “Thoughts on Painting,” *Correspondences*, 73.
31. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Modern State* (1935; London: Sheed and Ward, 1936), 152.
32. G. K. Chesterton, *The Ball and the Cross* (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 207.
33. Christopher Dawson, *Beyond Politics* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1939), 127.
34. Cooper, *The Work of Graham Sutherland*, 30.
35. *Ibid.*, 35.
36. Philip Rieff, *My Life among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 7, 21, 87.

37. Michel Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, trans., a Carthusian Monk (1987; Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), 83.
38. Hammer, *Bacon and Sutherland*, 65.
39. *Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph: The Genesis of the Great Tapestry in Coventry Cathedral*, ed. Andrew Réval (London: Pallas Gallery, 1964), 82.
40. Roger Scruton, for instance, has defined "kitsch" as all pretence, a sort of religious parody that is really a sham, attempting "to disguise the loss of faith, by filling the world with fake emotions, fake morality and fake aesthetic values." Roger Scruton, *Modern Culture* (London: Continuum, 2007), 86.
41. *Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph*, ed. Réval, 42, 82.
42. As Yorke writes, "I believe the Coventry Cathedral tapestry to be a less successful work than his other religious works because he was asked to portray, not a suffering, scourged or dead Christ, but one in calm majesty and glory." Yorke, *The Spirit of Place*, 135.
43. Quenot, *The Icon*, 87.
44. *Ibid.*, 161, 165, 40.
45. Graham Sutherland, "Art and Life," *The Listener*, November 13, 1941; also included in Sutherland, *Correspondences*, 42.
46. Jacques Maritain, *Art & Scholasticism* (1930; Tacoma, WA: Cluny Media, 2016), 33.
47. *Ibid.*, 2, 33, 27.
48. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of God: A Theological Aesthetics. Vol. 1: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (1982; San Francisco: Ignatius Press/New York: Crossroad Publications, 2009), 115–16. As Aidan Nichols writes, too, this is an especially holistic vision of God's creation that concludes that "beauty, goodness, unity, and truth are, in the last analysis, inseparable." Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 3.
49. David Torevell, *Losing the Sacred: Ritual, Modernity and Liturgical Reform* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 12.
50. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 111.
51. The Catholic writer Étienne Gilson, a contemporary of Maritain, also shared this historic view, that "during the long episode that lasted from the end of the fifteenth century to the beginning of nonrepresentational art, painters, instead of remaining firmly established on the ground of nature, progressively or regressively shifted over to the ground of imitation, representation, and, in short, exchanged making for knowing." Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality: The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1955, National Gallery of Art, Washington*, Bollingen Series 35.4 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 285.
52. Maritain, *Art & Scholasticism*, 232, 233.
53. "Philosophical unity," in this context, is taken from the Catholic artist Eric Gill, a follower of Maritain, who believed that without "religious guidance," in the form of

- a "Catholic" anchor, modernism was "bound to flounder in morasses of eccentricity" and "subjective emotionism." Accordingly, Gill believed that, if modernism ought to be anything, it should be "primarily a religious movement." See Eric Gill, "The Right-Mindedness of Modern Art," *Order: An Occasional Catholic Review* 1, no. 4, November 1929.
54. Roger Berthoud, *Graham Sutherland: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 56.
 55. Quoted in Thuillier, *Sutherland: Life, Work and Ideas*, 236.
 56. Quoted in Hammer, *Bacon and Sutherland*, 117.
 57. Roger Berthoud, *Sutherland*, 250, 56.
 58. *Ibid.*, 69.
 59. The historian Christopher Dawson believed he was denied a professorship at Leeds University in 1933 because of his Catholic faith, for example, and later complained, "They had much the same attitude to Catholics as the Nazis have to the Jews!" Quoted in Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World: A Life of Christopher Dawson, 1889–1970* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1984), 111. And as Linda Colley has written, it appears that discrimination against English Catholics continued "even into the twentieth century," despite the passing of the Roman Catholic Relief Act in 1929. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (1992; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 22.
 60. Graham Sutherland, "Thoughts on Painting," *Correspondences*, 70, 71.
 61. Thuillier, *Sutherland: Inspirations*, 40.
 62. Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 31.
 63. Sutherland, "Thoughts on Painting," *Correspondences*, 70.
 64. Graham Sutherland, "A Trend in English Draughtsmanship," *Signature*, July 3, 1936; also included in Sutherland, *Correspondences*, 30.
 65. Sutherland, "Art and Life," *Correspondences*, 44–45.
 66. Undated letter, probably 1951, British Council Archives; also quoted in Thuillier, *Sutherland: Inspirations*, 42.
 67. "On the Artistic Process," from a letter to H. P. J. in Robert Melville, *Graham Sutherland* (London: Ambassador, 1950); also included in Sutherland, *Correspondences*, 40; undated letter quoted in Thuillier, *Sutherland: Inspirations*, 42.
 68. Sutherland, "A Trend in English Draughtsmanship," *Correspondences*, 32.
 69. Sutherland, "Thoughts on Painting," *Correspondences*, 71.
 70. *Ibid.*, 74.
 71. Keith E. Anderson, "An investigation of the theological questions raised by twentieth-century works of art which make use of the iconography of the crucifixion" (PhD thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 2014), 52, 53.
 72. Rosalind Thuillier, *Sutherland: Life, Work and Ideas*, 5.
 73. Sutherland, "Thoughts on Painting," *Correspondences*, 73.
 74. Quenot, *The Icon*, 113.
 75. *Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph*, ed. Réval, 42.
 76. Sutherland, "Thoughts on Painting," *Correspondences*, 73–74.
 77. Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, 294.

78. Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 29.
79. Graham Sutherland, "Graham Sutherland explains his Art," *Illustrated London News*, February 19, 1966; also included in Sutherland, *Correspondences*, 97.
80. G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1933; Kelly Bray: House of Stratus, 2001), 52.
81. Berthoud, *Graham Sutherland*, 55.
82. Quoted in Berthoud, *Graham Sutherland*, 110.
83. Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, 26, 28.
84. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; Cavalier Classics, 2015), 107.
85. Melville, *Graham Sutherland*, 3.
86. Berthoud, *Sutherland*, 19.
87. Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 212, 265, 98.
88. J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 240–41.
89. Two letters from Paul Miller to Roger Berthoud, dated June 26, 1980, and July 20, 1980, Tate Gallery Archive, TGA 9011; also quoted, in part, in Berthoud, *Graham Sutherland*, 88.
90. Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 24, 26, 25.
91. Anthony Giambrone, "'You Spoke in a Vision' (Ps 89:19): Iconoclasm, the Incarnation, the Aspiration of Christian Art," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 18.
92. Maureen Mullarkey, "The Myth of Catholic Art: An Unmanifesto," *Crisis Magazine: A Voice for the Faithful Catholic Laity*, April 1, 2005, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2005/the-myth-of-catholic-art-an-unmanifesto-2>.
93. Evelyn Waugh, *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (London: Phoenix, 2009), 247.