

## Introduction

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# Introduction: Scrutinizing Beauty

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Beauty is the only thing that time cannot harm. Philosophies fall away like sand, creeds follow one another, but what is beautiful is a joy for all seasons, a possession for all eternity. — Oscar Wilde<sup>1</sup>

[A]u fond ma beauté tenait à presque rien, elle dépendait de notre huis clos. C'était une beauté qui se fanait en société, elle était sauvage, souvent elle montrait les dents, elle avait sa tanière. — Nelly Arcan<sup>2</sup>

Given its notoriously slippery nature, the concept of beauty emerges rhizomatically in this issue as a kaleidoscopic array of visions and perspectives. Beauty is difficult to define, difficult to replace with synonyms. The patronizing connotations of the word 'pretty', the implicit elitism of 'majestic', and the lustful undertones of 'attractive' make them, at best, subsets of beauty's capacious umbrella. As Roger Scruton claims in his *Very Short Introduction* to the subject, beauty can be tethered, perhaps even simultaneously, to personal experience, meaning-making, rational judgement, emotion, desire, and ideals.<sup>3</sup> By turn overlapping, competing and contradictory, its connotations warp and shift over time; consequently, Scruton draws his readers' attention to the fact that, even by the conclusion of this work, '[he has] not said what beauty is'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Lauren Arrington, Zoe Leinhardt, and Philip Dawid's recent multi-disciplinary edited collection, *Beauty* (2013), seeks to highlight the 'diversity of beauty' without purporting to offer up a conclusive definition of the term.<sup>5</sup> The diversity of beauty is explored in this volume of *Working Papers in the Humanities*, too, with seven essays that range across British, French, German, Russian, and American culture and philosophy, via such diverse media as novels, poetry, periodicals, illustration, film, and television. The essays in this special issue comprise a

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The English Renaissance of Art', in *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea: The Rare Oscar Wilde*, ed. by J. Wise Jackson (London: Fourth Estate, 1991), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Nelly Arcan, *Folle* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), p. 156. 'At its heart, my beauty barely held together, it was dependent on our solitude. It was a beauty that faded around other people, it was untamed, it often bared its teeth, it had a lair.'

<sup>3</sup> Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. xii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162–64.

<sup>5</sup> Lauren Arrington, Zoe Leinhardt, and Philip Dawid, 'Introduction', in *Beauty*, ed. by Lauren Arrington, Zoe Leinhardt, and Philip Dawid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 1–5 (p. 4).

multi-faceted exploration of the theme of beauty, focusing on subject matter drawn from the second half of the nineteenth century to the present day. In bringing such wide-ranging pieces together, this collection provides a snapshot of the multiplicity of engagements with notions of the beautiful and/or the aesthetic over the past one-and-a-half centuries, and of the work on this subject currently being undertaken by early-career researchers across the globe.

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Dickens has not simply serviced a Victorian appetite for sweetness and light. He has both mined the intricacies of his character's reality and provided throughways to the decadent period's accommodation of paradox, enriching his creation aesthetically and epistemologically. —  
Tamsin Evernden

In the first essay of this issue, Tamsin Evernden (Royal Holloway, University of London) reassesses aspects of Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), looking specifically at the visions of Jenny Wren, and the aesthetic implications of their multi-sensory nature. Evernden draws our attention to both such instances in Dickens's novel: Jenny claims to be able to suddenly smell an abundance of flowers, and relates the appearance of angelic children which seem to relieve her pain. Evernden addresses critics' previous reliance on reading these moments exclusively spiritually, in which emphasis on the material — the artwork and the artefact — is overlooked. She instead offers a reading in which the spiritual and the material are discussed in tandem. The angelic creatures are described as if through a veil of pain; Jenny's experience of them easing her suffering is linked to the sensuality of drug use (specifically, opium), and the luxuriousness associated with the newly-emerging Aesthetic Movement. While Evernden records that Dickens criticized the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, she shows that in *Our Mutual Friend* he echoes imagery explored in such works as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'The Blessed Damozel' (1850). She suggests Dickens's encounters with orthodox Christian iconography as another source, proposing Florentine art as another influence on Jenny's visions. The beauty of Jenny's angels, she posits, may well be a hybrid one. Similarly, Evernden reads Jenny's multi-sensory visions of rose petals and rose leaves as evocative of the tale of the Roman emperor Heliogabalus suffocating his courtiers under heaps of flowers. This too anticipates a sustained cultural interest in such imagery later in the century, as in Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888). The visions that Dickens ascribes to Jenny, Evernden concludes, are by no means saccharine and twee; instead, she proposes a re-evaluation of mid-Victorian beauty which assesses such imagery in light of all of its aesthetic intertextuality and complexity.

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Exceeding one's budget and trying to impress were infractions against elegance rather than tributes to it, an idea that both transcends the commercial essence of fashion and broadens the meaning of the term *shchegol'stvo* from signifying vain foppishness to elegance as the art of selecting. — Maria Alesina

Maria Alesina (Ghent University) further explores concepts of beauty in the nineteenth century, though she turns to Russian culture and focuses on physical rather than transcendental beauty. Alesina's study relates to periodical culture, and Russian periodicals' place within a broader corpus of European magazines, focusing on *Modnyi magazine* (1862–83) as a case study of particular note. Founded, published, and edited by Sofia Rekhnevskaiia-Mei, *Modnyi magazine*, Alesina demonstrates, was marketed as a publication that might appeal to women from a range of social backgrounds, bolstered by widespread contemporary fascination with Parisian fashion and the exclusive contracts that Rekhnevskaiia-Mei established with comparable French titles for the lending of illustrative material and fashion news. It was Rekhnevskaiia-Mei's reinvention of the concept of *shchegol'stvo* that set this periodical apart from its competitors: associating the term with the French concept of 'elegance', she redefined sartorial beauty as one founded on simplicity, classic design, and harmony between the ensemble and the individual's lifestyle and surroundings. Excessive spending and ostentatiousness were discouraged, and demonstrations of wealth or abundance considered vulgar. Elegance, Rekhnevskaiia-Mei asserted, was not connected to social class; one of the ways in which she ensured the success of *Modnyi magazin* was through appealing to a socially diverse audience, encouraging women of lesser means to make, invest in, or alter a few key, timeless pieces as the foundation of an elegant wardrobe. Perhaps most fascinating of all is Rekhnevskaiia-Mei's assertion that outward elegance naturally reflects inner virtue; the ideal that *Modnyi magazin* endorsed was a woman beautiful inside and out. In doing so, she reconciled traditional notions of morality with consumer culture, affecting not only local communities, but also, by tethering such concepts to European fashion more broadly, the concept of elegance as it was perceived on a global scale.

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The observer of the drawing cannot remain a coolly detached observer: he must accept the mystery of the representation and participate in it in order to appreciate its beauty. — Tuo Liu

Next, we turn to a French context, with Tuo Liu's (Harvard University) incisive reading of the role of beauty in Émile Zola's novel *Le Docteur Pascal*. Published in 1893, the novel is the last in Zola's Rougon-Macquart cycle, and thus represents a prime example of Zola's mature aesthetics. Liu identifies a sophisticated coincidence between Zola's own creative project and the aesthetics developed by the characters of *Le Docteur Pascal*. As such, he argues for the centrality of

beauty in a narrative which is more commonly read as a comment on scientific endeavour. At the level of character, Clotilde embodies an artistic sensitivity to individual subjectivity and perception, while the scientist Pascal represents the value of the detached, objective gaze that one often finds associated with naturalist writing. Clotilde's alternative aesthetics, Liu demonstrates, are never defeated; rather, Clotilde's artistry contaminates and complements Pascal's science. Beauty is elevated, taking its place as a site of ethical navigation. In tandem, Zola's own narrative practice supports the integration of feeling and beauty into his nuanced naturalist aesthetics. Liu's essay explores moments of narrative performativity, such as Zola's lyrical, descriptive ekphrasis of the biblical scene of King David and Abisaïg, which seems to adopt Clotilde's perspective. Furthermore, Liu asserts that there are different ways of seeing the beautiful, and that these ways of seeing are not ethically heterogeneous. What begins as a delicate aesthetic sensitivity can be corrupted into unacceptable idolatry and excessive ornamentation. This latter approach to the beautiful is textually punished in *Le Docteur Pascal*, such that, in the end, Zola's vision of beauty remains a *méthode d'étude*, a mode of study that is fundamentally yoked to science, and to a naturalist ethics of representation that Liu terms 'witnessing'.

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Often detailed and elaborate, seldom discreet in its bold assumptions of colour and layers of texture, late-Victorian decorative illustration realized its search for ideal and artistic beauty in an aesthetic compromise between the real outline of visible objects and pleasurable impressions derived from line movement, suggestive form, and rhythms of pattern. — Mariana Oliveira Pires

In the fourth essay, Mariana Oliveira Pires (University of Lisbon) addresses late-Victorian illustration, discussing the Arts and Crafts Movement and its context (such as its relationship to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Aestheticism), nineteenth-century aesthetic theory, and how this influenced works of the period, referring to examples of work by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Walter Crane, Edward Burne-Jones, and Aubrey Beardsley, among others. Pires observes how *fin-de-siècle* ideals of book design and illustration were linked to contemporary theories of ornament, and demonstrates how late-nineteenth-century illustrators themselves contributed to such debates in their pursuit of beauty. Pires's analysis incorporates examination of Walter Pater's influential call for a unity of form and subject matter, resulting, he asserted, in the pinnacle of beauty, which Pires relates to Arts and Crafts reform, handicraft, and book production. Her focus turns specifically to William Morris, the Kelmscott Press, and the 'politics of ornament', in a discussion of the artisan and the role of art in social engagement and labour relations. In Morris's view, art-objects such as decorated books should remain objects, rather than commodities.

This philosophy of the handmade lay at odds with similar designs which reached wider audiences through developments in technological reproduction. Beardsley, Pires shows, was one such artist who emulated the style of Kelmscott Press works for mechanically reproduced, wider-reaching publications. In this ever-evolving culture of materiality, Pires expertly situates the place of book illustration — of publications produced by disparate means — within the wider aesthetic debates of the late-nineteenth century.

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The in-between-ness of the shore allows H.D. to traverse the boundaries between masculine and feminine, wet and dry, observer and interpreter, and scientist and artist, to fully transcribe the beauty of a living thing. — Elizabeth O'Connor

Moving into the twentieth century, Elizabeth O'Connor (University of Birmingham) focuses on the wildflower poems in the modernist poet H.D.'s first collection, *Sea Garden* (1916). O'Connor identifies H.D.'s adoption of the liminal, littoral landscape in order to address the points at which apparent opposites overlap. Problematizing binaries allows H.D. to assert a kind of 'new beauty', a suitable subject matter for her as a marginalized poet working on the peripheries of a poetic tradition dominated by heterosexual men. That H.D. finds beauty in the enduring wildflowers, battered by wind and sea, rather than traditional, cultivated blooms, echoes her own perseverance as a bisexual female poet. H.D.'s poems, O'Connor observes in her analysis, contrast the wild and the domestic, reject florid romanticism, and adopt instead aspects of dry Imagism (tempered with allusions to the feminine's associations with water) in order to contest traditional notions of natural beauty. The wildflowers, she attests, exist in a space at once static and fluid, situated between binaries, outside of poetic tradition, parallel to, though not engulfed by, Imagist novelty. O'Connor relates this tension in H.D.'s work to her biography, remarking that a number of the titles of her poems are species native to the East Coast of H.D.'s youth. A scientific thread that runs throughout these poems can be traced to H.D.'s grandfather's research into freshwater algae; his illustrations, grouped by colour and shape, are mirrored in H.D.'s wildflower poems, which combine the precision of scientific record with the artistic potential of poetry. This, as O'Connor demonstrates, is a thoroughly hybrid beauty.

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I also view [Nietzsche's dichotomy] as possessing an allegorical salience, symbolizing a post-9/11 world where the embodiments of America's capitalistic hegemony are pervaded by terroristic violence. — Tom Cobb

Tom Cobb (University of Birmingham) brings a Nietzschean philosophical perspective to contemporary film criticism. Nietzsche's account of beauty

involves the interplay of the Apollonian, which is the beauty of order, rationalism and certainty, and the Dionysian, which represents the beauty of ecstasy, disorder and heightened emotions. Cobb's aesthetic criticism applies this Nietzschean lens to two 2007 films, *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*. In the modern context of post-9/11 cinema, according to Cobb's analysis, beauty in these films loses any association with catharsis and visual harmony and becomes instead a marker of political discontent and dysphoria, uncomfortably navigating both the Apollonian and the Dionysian. This argument pays close attention to the directors' use of allusion, narrative and character: for instance, Cobb argues that the conservative sheriff in *No Country for Old Men*, Ed Tom Bell, embodies the ideal of Apollonian order but shaken and shot through with a fresh ambivalence. Likewise, in the opening montage of *There Will be Blood*, the protagonist, Daniel Plainview, engages in a frustrating oil dig in a sterile mining landscape. Here, disorder undercuts and problematizes the aspiration to order. Using this Nietzschean framework, Cobb also scrutinizes the traditional American coalition between the evangelical church and free-market capitalism in *There Will be Blood*, suggesting the existence of an uneasy gulf between the two. Eschewing superficial, visual notions of beauty, and moving instead towards an ethical and political model, Cobb offers a novel approach to the theme. By teasing apart complex philosophical notions of beauty, he presents a valuable commentary on the fractured politics and economic crises of post-9/11 America.

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*Hannibal's* psychopath aesthetics pertains to the consumption of the products of murder — corpses, skins, organ meat — that have been made tasteful, tasty, or both. — Dominique Gracia

In the final essay, Dominique Gracia (University of Exeter) questions whether bodies of victims in television series focused on murder might be understood as beautiful, using Immanuel Kant's contributions to the philosophy of aesthetics as a framework for her analysis. Taking *Hannibal* (2013–15) as the basis for this study, Gracia explores 'psychopath aesthetics', in which such bodies become objects of both visual and cannibalistic consumption. She claims that *Hannibal* Lecter's and Kant's ethical frameworks share commonalities through their emphasis on a connection between morality, taste, and pleasure. Specifically, she uses Kant's 'moments' of beauty, as well as the way in which the audience is encouraged to see via the perspective of the series' main protagonist, Will Graham — who empathizes with killers — to assess whether human remains as they are depicted in *Hannibal* might be conceived of as beautiful. Gracia uses two contrasting examples to explore whether *Hannibal's* bodies are beautiful in the Kantian sense: the body of Will's colleague Beverly Katz, sliced into sections in the sagittal plane, and a mural resembling an eye made up of several

corpses. The former is beautiful in the Kantian sense, Gracia demonstrates, given Will's reaction to Beverly's remains, as well as the way in which they are displayed: designed to evoke awe and wonder. The latter is an aesthetic creation only from the point of view of serial killers; the 'naturalness' of mural is altered by Hannibal's addition of the original creator's own body, leaving Will unable to appreciate the whole as an aesthetic design. This evaluation is used as a springboard for a consideration of the series' relationship to Kant's understanding of aesthetics, morality, happiness, and hope. Gracia shows how Will's empathy tentatively provides Hannibal with another who might share his aesthetic appreciation. The consumer of such televisual narrative is also invited to participate, and through the audience's alignment with Will, experiences the unease which naturally accompanies an introduction to seeing — and appreciating — the beautiful through a psychopath's eyes.

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In the light of this fruitful heterogeneity, a fitting introduction can seek only to illuminate some pathways and map out some of the connections that exist between the essays offered here. The faultlines and divergences that emerge are emblematic of the dichotomous and contested nature of beauty. Common themes to these essays, meanwhile, suggest telling aspects of continuity across perceived boundaries of time, nationality, and media that contribute to a broader understanding of beauty's foundations.

In his entry on 'Beauty' in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (2005), Nick Zangwill concludes that '[b]eauty offers us pleasure of a certain sort'.<sup>6</sup> The notion that there is a coincidence or an overlap between beauty and pleasure informs many modern perspectives on what qualifies as beautiful. For instance, Mariana Pires's assessment of Morris's materialist philosophy reveals that pleasure as a sensuous experience is one intended consequence of the beautiful books of the Kelmscott Press. What Pires terms a 'quest for harmony' in art, designed to soothe the eye of the observer, renders the economy of beauty one of pleasure through and through. By the same token, Pires emphasizes the role of 'art as the product of men and women's pleasure'. Here, artistic beauty is pitched as the product as well as the producer of pleasure: the expression of the joy of its creator. And yet, this collection of essays demonstrates that the seemingly intimate association of beauty with pleasure cannot be taken for granted. In Tom Cobb's Nietzschean approach to aesthetics, his discussion does retain the sensual register, but beauty becomes an experience of displeasure, discomfort and dysphoria. As Cobb transposes the philosophical notion of beauty from 1870s Germany onto the modern context of post-9/11 America, Nietzsche's original characterization of beauty as a pleasant, even exultant connection of

<sup>6</sup> Nick Zangwill, 'Beauty', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. by Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 325–43 (p. 341).



elements is destroyed. What was once a ‘healthy interplay’ becomes an uneasy battleground — inextricable from frustration, despair, and disequilibrium. Beauty can be pleasure, but it can also be pain; beauty resides in both harmony and disharmony.

Beauty’s relationship to harmony was most strikingly elucidated, perhaps, by the neo-Platonists, who developed the Thomist framework of *exitus* and *reditus* and the Platonic idea of microcosms and macrocosms.<sup>7</sup> In a Christian context, both models posit the emanation of the multiplicity of being from a single principle, God, and the return of all things in creation back towards that unity. In this model, the role of beauty is to raise our eyes to heaven, prompting our souls to realize their divine and noble origins through analogy and contemplation. Tuo Liu’s essay on Zola’s novel *Le Docteur Pascal* explores this ethical formulation of beauty, in which artistic feeling leads to an awareness of the beautiful that borders on the spiritual; but Liu also contrasts aesthetic sensitivity with another kind of beauty, involving excessive corporeal admiration, idolatry, and ornamentation. Beauty may trigger philosophical or spiritual contemplation, but it can also evoke possessiveness and lust. In the neo-Platonic model, this represents a disruption to the harmonious ecosystem: indeed, Liu argues that lustful ornamentation is the *reverse* of the Platonic chain of the quest for beauty, because the observer’s attention moves away from an appreciation of the beauty of philosophy and knowledge towards an admiration of the body. Similarly, Tamsin Evernden’s essay on Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* exposes the dark underside of Jenny Wren’s reveries. What might appear on the surface as benign, unproblematically celestial experiences of beauty, linked to a Christian aesthetic, are revealed to be — in actuality — painful, excessive, and strange. Like Liu, Evernden scrutinizes and disrupts the connection between beauty and harmony. For Evernden, this troubling beauty does not invite ethical condemnation: rather, such a multi-faceted approach to beauty belies an array of intertextual sources and is the marker of an intelligent, decadent imagination, which enriches Dickens’s text.

The enchantments that belong to harmony as a mode of being beautiful lead into a discussion of the potential beauty of scientific classification. The art of classification straddles both the natural and the artificial, representing man’s attempt to portray theoretically the natural order of things. But to suggest that classification is beautiful is an unusual claim. Indeed, in Liu’s interpretation, *Le Docteur Pascal* cautions us against believing that an anthropological classification (in the form of the family tree) is the epitome of perfect beauty. The role of Doctor Pascal is precisely to negate the idea that beauty and science can be found in the same places. On the other hand, Elizabeth O’Connor provides a fascinating counterpoint to this view in her study of H.D.’s *Sea Garden*. H.D. was influenced by the Victorian fashion for scientific pursuit and

<sup>7</sup> Robert McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), p. 1.

observation as a means of insight; her work revels in the delicacy and precision of botanical and zoological terms. O'Connor argues that the detailed rendering of ecological reality is not a hindrance to beauty in H.D.'s poetry, but rather a cornerstone of it.

One objection to the act of equating science and beauty is that the scientific gaze leaves little room for subjectivity. After all, programmatic notions of beauty often conflict with individual assessments of what is beautiful. As the saying goes, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The perspectivism that grounds such a statement is what lies behind contemporary advertising slogans such as Dove's 'Choose Beautiful' campaign (2015), whose aphoristic message is that beauty is a subjective perception, even to the extent that an individual can actively, consciously change one's perception of what appears beautiful. In this view, selecting a definition for the beautiful does it a grave injustice, for the beautiful is precisely that which cannot be pinned down. By contrast, it is possible to conceive of a beauty that is subjective but well-defined and reproducible. Maria Alesina's essay, for instance, highlights a specific type of beauty as curated by Sofia Rekhnevskaja-Mei. This principle of elegance aims squarely at the universal, and Alesina argues that it was successfully disseminated, crossing societal, class, and national boundaries. For Rekhnevskaja-Mei's readers and supporters, beauty became defined by a set of canonical, practical guidelines which could be adopted on a widespread scale.

Other types of beauty, meanwhile, tread the line between subjectivity and objectivity in a different way. Whereas Rekhnevskaja-Mei's criteria for beauty are heuristically developed and have a practical application in the fashion world, one can imagine a more absolute approach to deciding whether something is beautiful or not based on a set of philosophical criteria. This is the premise of Dominique Gracia's convincing study of psychopath aesthetics in *Hannibal*. In a philosophical sense, beauty is no longer simply in the eye of the beholder, but it must adhere to given criteria, and can be somewhat impartially tested against them. Indeed, Gracia demonstrates that, despite the apparent ugliness and horror of Hannibal's cannibalistic trophies, the organs that he harvests can be considered objectively beautiful things, according to Kant's criteria for beauty. Kant does not do away with subjectivism completely, and it is understood that not everybody finds the same things beautiful. However, Gracia's Kantian framework allows for the elaboration of an external set of criteria for beauty, guiding us away from a pure, post-modern perspectivism.

The aestheticization of violence is a controversial approach to beauty, made mainstream in contemporary media by novels such as Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) and by directors such as Quentin Tarantino. Likewise, aesthetic beauty emerges troublingly from the heady spectacle of brute violence in both Gracia's and Cobb's essays. Gracia reveals that the violence enacted on victims' remains in *Hannibal* can create beautiful results, in a mirror of the examples of Apollonian and Dionysian violence identified by Cobb in

*No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*. Furthermore, as life is extinguished with clinical swiftness, the body is transformed into a scientific specimen, recalling the analyses of Liu, Evernden and O'Connor in turn and their gestures towards medical science. Right across these essays, the reader of this volume is invited to linger on the human body as beautiful object. The body can be a locus of beauty, acting as a mannequin for expressions of elegance as in Alesina's essay, and the book itself might be seen a beautiful and 'dressed' body in Pires's essay, its own corporeality denoted by such terminology as 'appendix', 'footnote' and 'spine'.

To conclude, this volume of *Working Papers in the Humanities* explores notions of beauty in works from the previous hundred-and-fifty years, showcasing work on a wealth of media which address this subject in rich and disparate ways. These contributions tackle questions of science and morality, the material and the immaterial, the worldly and the spiritual, amongst other concerns; and, speaking both directly and indirectly on the nature of the aesthetic experience, they provide valuable glimpses of some significant, reoccurring principles which seem to shape the debate surrounding beauty. In this, the Modern Humanities Research Association's centenary year, we as editors pause to reflect on the much shorter history of *Working Papers*, the first issue of which launched in 2006. Since that point, and thanks to the dedication of Barbara Burns and Stefano Evangelista, as well as our predecessors as editors and the dozens of contributors to *Working Papers*, the journal has flourished; the efforts of Graham Nelson, meanwhile, have made the online journal into a truly beautiful artefact in its own right. We are confident that its visual elegance is matched in the beautifully-crafted essays contributed by the writers in this volume.