



Finding the “Ideal”: F. Marion Crawford’s Mystical Theology and Literary Form in *Mr. Isaacs*

Niyati Sharma

Abstract

While popular nineteenth-century writer F. Marion Crawford’s interest in religion is well-documented, his fiction has been categorised as not carrying overt theological overtones. In contrast to this critical view, this article argues that Crawford’s fiction can be linked to his religious thinking; however, the manner in which his works articulate this interest is non-prescriptive. The article contends that Crawford’s handling of religious dilemmas shapes the unusual generic form of his literary works, in particular *Mr. Isaacs* (1882). To this end, the article examines Crawford’s mystical position on the Idealism-materialism question that was much debated within theological circles in the nineteenth century. Through an analysis of his non-fiction writings and *Mr. Isaacs*, I demonstrate how Crawford places ideas from Buddhism and Christianity in conversation to arrive at a “mystical” position on a spiritual “Ideal,” which he defines as an aspiration towards the transcendental that can be partly grasped in reality. As I demonstrate, Crawford draws on this unusual mystical notion of the “Ideal” to develop a new literary form that merges romance with elements from realism in *Mr. Isaacs*.

Keywords

Mr. Isaacs; popular fiction; F. Marion Crawford; mysticism; romance; “Ideal”; Buddhism; genres; Christianity; realism

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Finding the “Ideal”: F. Marion Crawford’s Mystical Theology and Literary Form in *Mr. Isaacs*

Niyati Sharma

Introduction¹

Francis Marion Crawford, the late nineteenth-century American writer who produced forty-four popular novels and numerous short stories, is no longer celebrated or remembered for his status as a former literary giant. If Crawford’s literary output is remembered, it is mostly for his “weird” tales.² In his own time, however, Crawford dabbled with a diverse range of genres – historical romances, realist novels, scientific romances – that exceeded the “weird” label (some examples include *Saracinesca* (1887), *Marzio’s Crucifix* (1887), *Pietro Ghisleri* (1893), and *The Heart of Rome* (1903)). Crawford’s works were, in fact, so popular that they found a vast readership in imperial centres and colonies alike: Macmillan released simultaneous editions of his novels in London and New York (Frost 2021: 84) and, according to Priya Joshi, in India and the colonies, Crawford’s works “were printed almost four times more than Mrs. Oliphant’s” (2002: 119). Recent years have not witnessed a sustained academic interest in his work, although in the 1960s and 1980s, Crawford’s writings were exhaustively surveyed by John Pilkington, Jr. and John C. Moran.³ Recently, Simon Frost has examined the popularity of Crawford’s adventure romances as reflective of mass-market reading trends and practices prevalent in the period (2021: 80).

Born to sculptor, Thomas Crawford and Louisa Cutler Ward, Crawford had a distinctly global upbringing: he lived and studied in Cambridge, Rome, and Heidelberg (Moran 1981: 4). In early adulthood, Crawford engaged in professional translation work in European languages to make ends meet – it was at this time that he took up the study of Sanskrit (“F. Marion Crawford” 1898). In 1879, he moved to India to improve his Sanskrit skills. While in India, he applied for the post of the editor of *The Indian Herald*, a newspaper based in Allahabad. The period at *The Indian Herald* provided him with the opportunity to deeply examine and

¹ I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments on the article. A special thanks to Tenzin Choephel, Swati Chawla, Yasser Shams Khan, Mahvish Shahab, Kriti Budhiraja, and Swarnim Khare for their valuable comments and suggestions.

² Examples include “The Upper Berth” (1886) and *The Witch of Prague* (1891), see Joshi (2004).

³ For more on Crawford’s life and works, see Pilkington (1964) and Poole (2011).

understand another world: an India under colonial rule, Anglo-Indian life, and the religious history of the region. After a year at the newspaper, Crawford returned to America where he relayed his stories to his uncle Sam Ward, who urged him to document his experiences in fiction a form. And thus, *Mr. Isaacs* was written. Set in colonial Shimla, it portrays the encounter between Mr. Isaacs, a Persian entrepreneur who is identified as Muslim at the outset, and Paul Griggs, the narrator. The primary plot focuses on a budding romance between Isaacs and a British woman, Katharine Westonhaugh. In this unusual romance, religion meets romantic love as a Buddhist adept predicts that a tiger-hunt will not bode well for the romance – a prediction that turns out to be true. The aborted love story then transforms into a meditation on the ill-fated lovers' meeting in heaven, and a quest for salvation.

In framing the novel, Crawford drew on Buddhism, Hinduism, and Theosophy (traditions he possibly encountered in India) and placed them in conversation with Catholicism (his chosen belief system). In this article, I argue that Crawford drew on the dilemmas central to his religious thinking to experiment with *Mr. Isaacs*'s unusual generic mode that became one of his preferred literary styles. One such dilemma that Crawford works through is the Idealism-materialism debate, also referred to as the soul versus matter/body debate, which was at the heart of the clash between a Protestant Christian and scientific discursive view in the nineteenth century (Turner 1978: 357; Franklin 2018: 6). As apparent in John Tyndall's 1874 Belfast address, T. H. Huxley's writings, and Darwin's evolutionary theories, scientific materialism increasingly gained legitimacy as a worldview.⁴ As a result of this paradigmatic shift, matter (instead of spirit) was prioritised as the lens to understand phenomena. An anxiety about a materialist worldview was not only prevalent in Christian domains; as J. Jeffrey Franklin argues, "alternative religions" responded to it in complex, diverse ways (2018: xi). The scientific naturalist turn raised pressing questions about the nature or existence of an afterlife as well as the status or relevance of the category of the soul. Against this context, this article explores Crawford's stance on the soul versus matter debate and his mystical notion of the "Ideal," which was influenced by his unorthodox reading of elements from Buddhism and Christianity.

As I show, Crawford's position on the Idealism-materialism debate shaped the form and the content of his fiction (an aspect he wrote about extensively in *The Novel: What It Is* (1893)). Most significantly, his fiction does not offer a sermonised prescriptive message on religious subjects. Instead, he develops a generic form that blends romance with realist elements, which, I argue, articulates his position on the "Ideal" in formal terms. For instance, rather than adopting a prescriptive mode, Crawford presents richly detailed descriptions of everyday life combined with an imaginative aspiration that romanticises these routine aspects. This article claims that Crawford's formal invention of blending realist features with romance in *Mr. Isaacs* reflects his opinions on the spirit-body debate that he approaches through the lens of Idealism. In the first part, I illustrate how Crawford critiques the popular Theosophical version of Buddhism to instead locate a metaphysical notion of the "Ideal" in the religion. I then examine Crawford's comparison of Buddhism and Christianity on the subject of the "Ideal" in the context of *nirvāṇa*, and map out his unusual mystical position that attributes some significance to an understanding of the living body. The third part traces how this position on the Idealism-materialism question translates into the literary form of *Mr. Isaacs*.

⁴ Bernard Lightman has examined the extent to which religion and science were actually in conflict (2001: 351). For further reading that complicates the terms of the debate, see Franklin (2018: 2-18). I use the term Idealism as romance writers like Crawford too used this term to indicate an opposition to materialist trends of the time.

There has been a recent surge in studies that engage with the esoteric, occult, spiritualist, and theological aspects of nineteenth-century literature. Such a focus marks a move away from the treatment of esotericism as the “Other” within academic discourse (Hanegraaff 2012: 3). As Wouter J. Hanegraaff has argued, since the Enlightenment, esotericism has been marginalised as being incompatible with rationalist modes of knowledge-production (151). Increasingly, however, claims that the nineteenth century was an age of disenchantment or secularisation have been deemed to be overstated (Asprem 2019: 17) as Victorians were invested in unpacking occult and theological inquiries.⁵ A similar tilt towards the occult can be found in Victorian popular fiction: as Christine Ferguson claims, “occultural popular fiction” did not merely mirror occult ideas but actively contributed to debates internal to the field (2019: 96, 102).

In line with these interventions, this article treats Crawford’s views as representative of the sheer diversity of voices that constituted the occult-theological domain in this period. In an arena thriving with heterogeneous discourses, participants carved out their unique positions. Occult and religious approaches were not always in agreement in this milieu. And, in this regard, Crawford is a valuable example of a thinker who is anti-occult but pro-religion and mysticism as he rejects the occult dimension of Theosophical Buddhism for a hybrid version of mysticism (influenced by Buddhism and Catholicism). A turn towards Eastern religions was itself a characteristic feature of hybrid religious thought in the period: writers like Marie Corelli both drew on Buddhism and were hostile to it (see Franklin 2003), while Spiritualists largely rejected this influence. Crawford’s is an unusual voice because he does not treat Buddhism as a threat; rather, he sees it as being somewhat compatible with Catholic views in service of a larger mystical vision. The article traces his understanding of the resonance between the religions as he orients them towards a mystical position (on the spirit-body question) that, in turn, exceeds them.

Against Theosophical Buddhism: F. Marion Crawford and the “Ideal”

Crawford engaged with several religious discourses before choosing Catholicism as his preferred religion. Despite his affinity with Catholicism, Buddhism remained central to Crawford’s thinking as he frequently wrote commentaries on contemporary trends and publications – in particular, he both drew on and rejected Theosophical Buddhism. Crawford’s debt to Buddhism is not surprising as nineteenth-century Britain and America witnessed a considerable rise of interest in the religion. With the publication of Edwin Arnold’s poem *The Light of Asia* (1879) and the emergence of the comparative religion paradigm, which catalysed engagement with Eastern religious scriptures, Buddhism became a focal point of interest in the West. Max Müller and T. W. Rhys Davids and the Orientalists’ translation of Buddhist Pāli texts such as *Dhammapada* and *Vinaya* texts as part of the *Sacred Books of the East* (1881) series, made the religion more accessible.⁶

The emergent field of Theosophy, too, was associated with Buddhism. However, even as Madame Blavatsky highly endorsed Buddhism, she had to clarify that Theosophy is not to be conflated with Buddhism (Blavatsky 1889: 12; Tweed [1992] 2000: 52). In its reading of Buddhism, Theosophy did not subscribe to standardised ideas of scriptural Buddhism found in Theravada *Tripitāka* texts. Rather, Blavatsky declared that she and a few chosen individuals

⁵ See, for example, Owen (1989), Thurschwell (2001), Luckhurst (2002), Larsen (2004), and Melnyk (2008).

⁶ See also Almond (1988), Tweed ([1992] 2000), and Harris (2006).

possessed access to a set of teachings, articulated by the Śākyamuni (Rudbøg 2020: 77). Blavatsky labelled this branch Esoteric Buddhism and claimed that it dealt with an interior compendium of knowledge (the source of “all religions and philosophies”) (Sinnott ([1883] 1889: vi) that had not been revealed to the public (Rudbøg 2020: 79). These hidden teachings, she stated, were communicated to her by a group of Tibetan seers/Brothers that she took lessons from. Blavatsky called these medium-guides “Mahatmas,” the most prominent adepts being Master Koot Hoomi (supposedly a merging of H. S. Olcott and A. O. Hume’s names) and Master Morya (Lillie [1883] 1884: 13). Generating an aura of mystery around points of access, Blavatsky made the secretive dimension the selling-point of her Buddhist discourse. British Theosophist, Alfred Percy Sinnott highlighted this aspect: “Hitherto this sacredness has always prescribed their absolute concealment from the profane herd” ([1883] 1889: 29).

As Franklin has argued, Blavatsky’s interpretations of Buddhism both drew on and significantly departed from “her reading in ... comparative religion” (2008: 75). Despite her expansive reading, theologically, Esoteric Buddhism deviated from orientalist readings of Buddhism to the extent that commentators alleged that it did not resemble the religion (Rudbøg 2020: 81). This is evident in how Theosophists did not value Buddha the way orientalists did: unlike Müller’s treatment of Buddha as a historically interpretable “ordinary man,” for Sinnott, the Buddha is “one in a series of adepts” in a mysterious divine schema (Lopez 2020: 46). Blavatsky’s ideas received significant backlash for shifting the focus from traditional Buddhist scriptures. Tim Rudbøg highlights how Max Müller too echoed this charge: while Müller did not characterise Blavatsky as a charlatan, he did suggest that she had been fooled by fraudulent “Mahatmas from Tibet” (Müller [1893] 1901: 107; Rudbøg 2020: 84). In *Koot Hoomi Unveiled* (1883), Arthur Lillie (a writer and soldier who converted to Buddhism) claimed that parts of Blavatsky’s writings were plagiarised ([1883] 1884: 9).

Like the sceptics mentioned above, Crawford distanced himself from Theosophy, clarifying in the essay, “A Modern View of Mysticism” (1894): “The writer wishes to state that he is not, and never has been either a ‘Theosophist’ or a spiritist; he also begs that whatever is said here may be judged, if read, without regard to allusions to this and kindred subjects which he has made in novels” (1894a: 50). Here, Crawford does not deny the references to Theosophy in his fiction but he is careful to not frame them as an endorsement. This was in contrast to Blavatsky’s attempt to appropriate his voice. In her words: “the key-note for mystic and Theosophic literature was Marion Crawford’s *Mr. Isaacs*” ([1887] 1897: 102). Though Blavatsky noted a few minor discrepancies in Crawford’s reading of Theosophy, her review was largely supportive of his depiction in the novel: in particular, she appreciates Crawford’s accuracy in portraying the adepts as “conceivable human beings, instead of impossible creatures of the imagination” ([1883] 1969: 342). Further, she implies that Crawford’s portrayal of adepts was more nuanced than Edward Bulwer Lytton’s depiction of the occult medium in *Zanoni* (342).

Crawford’s *Mr. Isaacs* begins with a brief but explicit mention of the presence of popular Theosophists in Simla: “among the rhododendron trees Madame Blavatzky, Colonel Olcott and Mr. Sinnott move mysteriously in the performance of their wonders” ([1882] 1892: 68). Esoteric Buddhism primarily makes an appearance through the character of Ram Lal, an adept resembling Blavatsky’s Mahatma, Kooth Hoomi Lal Singh. Crawford appears to have exploited the novel’s connection with Theosophy: Olcott writes that Crawford’s uncle, the Theosophist Sam Ward, informed him that Crawford “inspired by the published accounts of Mahatma K.H.” wrote the novel “as if ... under the influence of an outside power” (1900: 395). Crawford clearly used the allusion to Theosophy to generate mystery around his work; and while, at a first glance, the novel reads like a celebration of Theosophical ideas, a closer reading

reveals otherwise. The novel portrays Ram Lal as a practicing Buddhist adept who possesses the ability to accurately predict the future by performing astral (out-of-body) travel. Isaacs idolises Ram Lal as the spiritual master equipped with a higher knowledge of the mysteries of existence. While the novel does not overtly question Ram Lal's foresight, it does subtly critique his powers. The plot hinges on Ram Lal's ill-fated prediction that a mishap might occur on a tiger-hunt. Despite Isaacs's attempts to prevent the tiger-hunt from turning dangerous, Katharine, his love interest, contracts a fatal bout of jungle fever on the hunt. As Katharine battles the illness (which ultimately leads to her death), Ram Lal pays an astral visit to Griggs, the narrator. However, the purpose of his visit is unclear. Is he visiting Griggs to offer consolation or to flaunt that his prediction has turned out to be accurate? Crawford portrays a cold and indifferent Ram Lal, so consumed by his abstract spiritual pursuits that he is indifferent to Katharine's struggles as she fights death ([1882] 1892: 299). At one point, Griggs mocks Ram Lal for deliberately relinquishing any responsibility towards saving Katharine's life (299). The scene critically questions Ram Lal's mystical persona as Griggs mocks Ram Lal's astral self, indicating that his being was a mere mirage, lacking any power: Griggs suggests that "if he could prophesy, he might as well do so to some purpose" (300).

It is likely that through Griggs's confrontation with Ram Lal, Crawford incorporates a critique of Esoteric Buddhism in the novel. During a discussion between Griggs and Isaacs, Griggs expands on his non-Theosophical views on Buddhism which mirror Crawford's:

The subject [Buddhism] is full of interest, as you say ... There is something so rational about their theories, disclaiming, as they do, all supernatural power; and, at the same time, there is something so pure and high in their conception of life, in their ideas about the ideal ... that I do not wonder Edwin Arnold has set our American transcendentalists and Unitarians and freethinkers speculating about it all.

(113-14)⁷

While Griggs does not explicitly say so, he highlights an important aspect of how his theological thinking differs from the Theosophists: his understanding of Buddhism subscribes to a belief in the "Ideal," accessed via the soul and the mind, as opposed to (his view of) the Theosophists' belief in the supernatural. For Crawford, and Griggs, "authentic" Buddhism distances itself from supernatural powers (an investment in miracles and phenomena such as table-rapping and séances); instead, it exhibits a commitment to an "Ideal" or "supreme freedom," as Isaacs calls it (115). While Theosophy emphasises the exceptional nature of occult acts, Crawford, following a more traditional approach, endorses an indifferent stance. The higher moral ends promised by the religion – "pure and high in their conception of life" (113) – outweigh ephemeral miracles. As Isaacs later points out, "'phenomena' may amuse women and children, but the real beauty of the system lies in the promised attainment of happiness" (115). Isaacs therefore rejects Blavatsky's interest in miracles, and shifts the focus to Buddhism's emphasis on the purification and development of thought. Here, Crawford weaves in a subtle critique of how the Theosophist's turn to spiritualism had also contaminated their

⁷ Griggs implies that Transcendentalism borrowed its ideas from Arnold's immensely popular poem *The Light of Asia* (1879), which portrayed Buddha's journey of attaining enlightenment. In the same breath, Griggs also mentions freethinkers and Unitarians, who enthusiastically approached Buddhism in the period. The Unitarian thinker, T. W. Higginson recommended teaching "the broadest religion" (1871: 23) and imagined a sympathy between most world religions.

interpretation of Buddhism.⁸ In this regard, Crawford echoes an opinion found within contemporary American Buddhist circles that Theosophy's appropriation of Buddhist discourse negatively affected the perception of the religion (Tweed [1992] 2000: 49).⁹

While Griggs mentions the rationalist impulse in Buddhism possibly to negate any supernatural associations linked with Buddhism, Crawford's reading of Buddhism is primarily metaphysical.¹⁰ That is, he locates an impulse in the religion that aspires towards realising the highest impulses in mankind, which he defines as the "Ideal." Crawford's imagination of the mystical, metaphysical dimensions of the spiritual "Ideal" and his identification of this notion in Buddhist thought is an interpretation unique to him. The "Ideal," in Crawford's Buddhist framework, represents the highest level of consciousness that brings the mind closer to divinity. It signifies the purest level of thought that emanates from the soul, which can, in turn, allow one to access transcendental universal truths. Crawford's metaphysical/mystical view appears to combine elements from Neoplatonism and Hegelian Idealism. Drawing on a Neoplatonic view wherein humans are treated as real-world reflections of an "Ideal" divinity, Crawford wrote that "the ideally perfect man ... approaches most nearly to the image of God" (1894a: 52). While Crawford is not precise with his application of these concepts, he implies that the individual mind and the existing world (which he calls "Idea" and "the manifestation") emanate from and mirror One Unified consciousness. As a result, Neoplatonic terms such as "the first" and "the One" can be amply found in his writings, as referring to both an original Platonic "Ideal" and God. Crawford's use of Idealism also draws on the concept of the Hegelian Absolute Spirit. Hegel theorises that the particular finite individual mind (through dialectical self-sublation) overcomes its finitude, paving the way for the articulation of an objective spirit. As the spirit dialectically develops, it approaches its most Absolute expression (the complete form of self-consciousness, which is the Being of God in itself). Similarly, according to Crawford, the Buddhist schema also imagines the universe as a projection of collective consciousness: it exists as a form of totality; the universal that encompasses and shapes all particulars of worldly life. Most significantly, the Absolute represents the journey of consciousness through generations that yields the purest form of Being, thus signifying God in a metaphysical sense. This wholeness, in Hegel's schema, contains nothingness (Nuzzo 2010: 67), which further resonates with Crawford's assertion that "where nothing is manifested, there is potential Being" (1894b: 113).¹¹

Reading Crawford's Mystical "Ideal" in Buddhism and Christianity

Across his non-fiction, Crawford interpreted elements in Buddhism as a confirmation of his mystical beliefs. Though he rejected Theosophical Buddhism for its lack of attention to the "Ideal," he did initiate a conversation between his version of Buddhism and Christianity on this

⁸ According to Franklin, Theosophy shifted the focus of spiritualist discourse from spirits and mediums to adepts and theology (2008: 69). Further, influenced by the Buddhist skandhas, Theosophy developed a model of the self, which added to spiritualist discourse (81).

⁹ In a different context, for Arthur Conan Doyle's interest in Theosophy, Buddhism, and Vedanta, see Chatterjee (2023).

¹⁰ Thomas Tweed categorised late-nineteenth-century America's interest in Buddhism along three axes: the esoteric, the rationalist and the romantic interest ([1992] 2000: 49). Crawford does not neatly fit into these types; instead, he emerges as a metaphysical idealist.

¹¹ Ernest Fenollosa, a nineteenth-century thinker with a romantic aesthetic interest in Japanese Buddhism, described Crawford's beliefs as "Theosophy mixed with a little diluted Hegel" (cited in Fields, [1981] 2022: 182).

subject in the context of salvation.¹² Crawford's comparative inquiry was more preoccupied with the connections between Buddhism and Christianity than with the relationship between Buddhism and South Asian religions. This was a commonly examined point of comparison as nineteenth-century scholars used Buddhism to address questions about the history and origins of Christianity. Thinkers were drawn to the similarities (and differences) presented by both the religions, in particular they read Buddhism's "ethical system as outlined in the Five Precepts and the Noble Eightfold Path, [as] the corollary to the Ten Commandments" (Franklin 2003: 23). Besides the obvious similarities, religious commentators were interested in tracing the lineage and flow of ideas between the two religions. The attempt to trace such connections yielded the following questions: was Christianity a derivative of Buddhism? And did Christ come into contact with Buddha thus gleaning his teachings from Buddhist texts? T. W. Rhys Davids, the eminent scholar of Pāli Buddhist texts, was of the view that the two religious discourses were not connected. He asserted that the resemblances between Buddhism and Christianity were accidental or, rather, co-incidental, as a consequence of both the religions emerging in comparable contexts. Both represented value-systems that questioned structural inequalities: Buddha and Christ arose as "the leader of a reaction against dependence on formal rites and the ascendancy of a priestly caste" (Rhys Davids [1877] 2020: 254). Crawford's position appeared to differ from Rhys Davids's reading: though he never adopted an explicit stance on this debate, he somewhat obliquely agreed with the assertion that Christianity can be linked to Buddhism, even if the direction of influence cannot be ascertained. In this regard, Crawford echoed contemporary thinkers, Arthur Lillie and Nicolas Notovitch, a Crimean journalist, who claimed that Jesus left Galilee and travelled to India to live with monks. While this claim was later found to be a hoax, that Crawford translated Notovitch's controversial book *Life of Saint Issa* (1894) for an American audience proves that he did somewhat agree with the position. He also favourably reviewed Lillie's book *Buddha and Early Buddhism* (1881), which considered the similarities between Buddhism and Christianity through a reading of Buddhist symbols, monuments, and rituals (Lillie 1881: ix). While Crawford's review embraces Lillie's argument about similar value-systems between Buddhism and Christianity, he vehemently rejects Lillie's linguistic observations: "It is when the author ventures into the high seas of philology that he goes beyond his depth." (1881: 350).

Most significantly, Crawford treated the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity as an entry point into deeply exploring the Idealism-materialism debate in the context of *nirvāṇa* (that he reads as salvation). In 1894 (almost 12 years after publishing *Mr. Isaacs*), he wrote a series of articles titled "A Modern View of Mysticism" in *Book Reviews* clarifying the relationship between mysticism and Idealism. In these articles, Crawford expands on his understanding of the Buddhist mystic's notion of "Pure Being" or the imagination of pure Spirit – the eternal consciousness that exists beyond the material world, which encompasses "both the true and the permanent, and the untrue or material" (1894b: 111). Most religions, Crawford writes, are oriented towards the "separation of the soul from the Material 'I'" (1894b: 109). As previously mentioned, Crawford locates not only a mental but a spiritual "Ideal" in Buddhist thought. In so doing, he unusually imposes dualistic thinking onto the religion, assuming that it endorses a split between the soul and the body. In this regard, his thinking contradicts the core tenet of *anattā*. Though there exist diverse interpretations of Buddhism, the Four Seals and the Three Marks of Existence prescribe impermanence of the self and absence of the soul as a foundational notion. This is because the doctrine emphasises an opposition to the idea of an eternal self. Contextualising the supposed origins of this idea, scholar and translator Caroline Rhys Davids claimed that in Pāli Buddhism the notion of the

¹² Here, Crawford deviates from the original religion as he blurs the distinction between salvation and *nirvāṇa*.

non-soul or non-self emerged in response to an overdeterministic Vedic Hinduism, which viewed the universe as animistically energised by a divine spirit ([1912] 1928: 56-57). In contrast to the Vedic Hindu view, most traditions of Buddhist thought treat the notion of the enduring soul or a focus on permanence itself as the source of misery.¹³ The path to freedom thus involves giving up any attachment to the illusion of permanence and reconciling with the lack of stable essences (Franklin 2011: 23). A complete release from the idea of existence can provide relief – this final stage is called *nirvāṇa*, and it lacks a spiritual or soul connotation in Buddhist thought (though interpretations of this can vary across Buddhist traditions). That is, with *nirvāṇa* (an end to cycles of existence/suffering), a liberatory state of “emptiness” (hollowed out existence/essence) is accessed.

The notion of *nirvāṇa*, or the search for a release from existence, could then also be misread as a nihilistic rejection of the world. And, indeed, the dominant mid-century discourse on Buddhism labelled it as a pessimistic and non-theistic religion. Thomas Tweed has noted that Americans in this period perceived Buddhism to be a threatening discourse that lacked the concept of a soul, and conceived of the universe as nothingness ([1992] 2000: 18). Monier Monier-Williams, the British scholar of Sanskrit, also remarked on the religion’s lack of a comforting Godly presence: “early Buddhism could not claim to be a religion ... It refused to admit the existence of a personal Creator, or of man’s dependence on a higher Power” (1889: 539). By the 1870s, as Buddhism became increasingly popular, Western commentators took a more generous view. Crawford’s view differed from the sceptics. In his words, Buddhism endorses a “belief in a Divine Essence” and “the re-birth of soul in different bodies, until, by good works, it attains to the blissful state called *nirvāṇa*” (1881: 349).¹⁴ Crawford does not classify *nirvāṇa* as nihilistic; instead, he describes it as a peaceful state of soul’s ascent to truth. In his view, it supports the existence of an immortal soul that merges with divine consciousness after transcending the earthly realm. Crawford’s optimistic reading could have roots in his belief that Buddhism and Christianity are in fundamental agreement. As he states: “And Nirvana corresponds to the Christian heaven in the epithets applied to it ... ‘A place of refreshment, light, and peace’” (1894a: 55). At another point, the influence of Catholic ideas is apparent as he superimposes Christian Trinity onto Pure Being, Manifestation, and Result in Buddhism (1894a: 51). Perhaps because he considered the two discourses to be similar, he readily locates the soul in Buddhist *nirvāṇa*. In this regard, he echoes the British Anglican theologian F. D. Maurice, who argued that the Buddhist “conviction that this human spirit must, in some mysterious manner, be divine, has its full justification in Christianity” (1880: 821).

Buddhism unusually appears to provide Crawford with a vocabulary to think about the status of the soul, its relationship with matter, and its possible union with eternal consciousness. However, how exactly are Christianity and Buddhism related in Crawford’s schema? Crawford possibly uses Buddhism to validate Christian ethos while simultaneously propping up Christianity (Catholicism) as the superior tradition. In *The Ralstons* (1893), the narrator, Griggs, engages in a discussion about the philosophy of the immortality of the soul that, to some degree, clarifies the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity, as envisioned by Crawford. In Griggs’s words, the soul is “axiomatic”: “I said that the soul was eternal ... The soul is a part of God, and, therefore, since the part exists, the Whole, of which it is a part, exists

¹³ Caroline Rhys Davids argued that early Buddhism did acknowledge a temporary “I”, a position echoed by other scholars (1927: 635).

¹⁴ Several stances on *nirvāṇa* were prevalent in the period: “1) that *Nirvana* is annihilation ...; 2) that *Nirvana* is the merging of individual consciousness into the godhead or the universe, *Brahm* or the Oversoul; and, 3) that *Nirvana* is an enlightened state that one can attain while still living on earth” (Franklin 2005: 962).

also” (1893a: 54-5). Other characters in *Ralstons* label Griggs a Buddhist for holding these views. Griggs does not overtly reject the affiliation to Buddhism but he is firm about his beliefs being purely Christian. Like Griggs, in “A Modern View of Mysticism” Crawford too seems to be in awe of the Buddhist approach to spiritual questions but he is confident about Catholic theology being superior. While encouraging Catholics to learn from Buddhism, Crawford also hopes to amplify the Buddhist’s interest in Christianity: “The interest felt of late by Christians in the Buddhist doctrine makes it easy to understand that a Buddhist could feel deep sympathy in Christianity, which ... is one of the most complete forms of mysticism” (1894a: 53). Further, Crawford implies that Christianity addresses the issue of salvation better: he claims that, unlike Buddhism, Christianity makes salvation available to all, as even the greatest sinner is allowed the possibility of redemption (57).

Crawford possibly also found the Christian, and particularly Catholic, position on the body in the Idealism-materialism debate to be more complex. Though the spiritual goal of aspiring towards the “Ideal” is a stance that (to his mind) both Buddhism and Christianity endorse, Crawford explores the possibility of achieving the same when alive. For Crawford, while the true mystic is not attached to matter, they do not fully reject the significance of the material realm either. Rather, they search for “an almost perfect happiness on earth, whereas religion promises it hereafter” (1894b: 110). Here, Crawford appears to be influenced by Catholic Thomist beliefs that consider the body to be a vital component of the human self. In the late nineteenth century, Catholicism under the aegis of Pope Leo XIII witnessed the revival of Thomas Aquinas’s theology in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879).¹⁵ Aquinas conceptualised that “the individual human being is essentially a composite of body and soul” (the soul, in Aquinas’ schema, is an intellectual entity) (Spade 1994: 92). Though not precisely a composite, in Crawford’s view, our “‘selves’ are the result of a *general connection* between a totally un-material principle and matter” (1894d: 234, emphasis mine). While the Thomistic influence is visible in Crawford’s recognition of the body, he does not merely explore the distinction but, significantly, also considers the relationship between matter and the divine “Ideal.” Even though Crawford endorses transcendence of the soul as the end-goal, his mystical view does not entirely discount material reality.

In fact, Crawford is mildly critical of the impulse to imagine the soul’s desire for salvation as an escape from the body, without considering the operations of matter.¹⁶ While the “Ideal” is the superior and “pure” state of being, according to Crawford, he implies that an understanding of matter – as the Spirit manifests in the body – can be used to eventually experience the spiritual realm:

If the mystic could tear his Pure Being from his material self with his hands, as it were, he would not need to consider the nature of matter at all ... As it is, knowing that the one can be separated from the other only by a process of gradual and thorough elimination, it is necessary for him to have some general knowledge of what matter is.

(1894d: 235)

A knowledge of the relationship between “material organs” and the soul is “necessary to the process” of reaching the stage of salvation both during one’s life and after (232). As manifestation represents “‘Pure Being’ ... involved with matter,” Crawford suggests that the

¹⁵ Crawford’s admiration of Pope Leo XIII is evident in his 1897 and 1898 lectures and articles.

¹⁶ Crawford describes a salvation-like “communion of the saints” as “a preliminary oneness of the soul of a living man who is in a ‘state of grace,’ with the souls of the Blessed in Heaven, who are themselves made one with God forever” (1894b: 112).

body can only be transcended through an understanding of the soul-matter connection (235). Separating the two is a slow process which further makes it necessary to learn about matter. Crawford's argument becomes convoluted at this point. He suggests that both the materialist and the mystic believe in the notion of existence: the mystic believes in the existence of a metaphysical being, while the materialist does not look beyond matter (233). The mystic however has an abstract answer for the presence of life in matter – the source being divine Spirit (235). Accessing the Spirit thus requires that the body be removed as an obstacle in the soul's self-realisation. Even so, Crawford does not diminish the body's status as a manifestation of the "Ideal." Ultimately, the body has to be necessarily lived through to be transcended: "The conclusion which must force itself upon every one, materialist and mystic alike, is that in some way the personal identity is bound up ... with all atoms of certain particular classes of matter" (234). Thus, while the degree of importance Crawford accords to matter is unclear, he does not elide over the existence of manifestation, nor does he deny that the mystic can experience salvation when alive.

In *Mr. Isaacs*, the question of whether the "Ideal" ought to be prioritised over matter is indirectly raised in a discussion between Isaacs and Griggs. Isaacs, the hero, is painted as a complex spiritual thinker alert to the significance of understanding the bodily realm for broaching the "Ideal." And, indeed, Isaacs chides Griggs for being overinvested in Idealism. Adopting a humorous tone, Isaacs claims that Griggs's Idealist bias prevents him from experiencing the complexities of "lived" experience:

You are a man who believes in all that is good and beautiful in theory, but by too much indifference to good in small measures – for you want a thing perfect, or you want it not at all – you have abstracted yourself from perceiving it anywhere, except in the most brilliant examples of heroism that history affords. You set up in your imagination an "Ideal" which you call the good man, and you are utterly dissatisfied with anything less perfect than perfection.

(Crawford [1882] 1892: 160-1)

While Isaacs does not mirror Crawford's views in the novel as closely as Griggs, he acts as the voice that spells out the contradictions inherent in Crawford's theology. Here, Isaacs makes a case for valuing the journey to transcendental perfection rather than the "Ideal" itself. He presents the process of reaching the state of perfection as a gradual incremental path, as opposed to accessing a readymade "Ideal." In Isaacs's view, Griggs's attachment to idealisation has made him lose the capacity for tolerating imperfections or even appreciating small moments of flawed beauty or kindness – his larger-than-life expectation, Isaacs implies, will only further alienate him from society and spiritual happiness in the present. The "Ideal," then, has to be partly understood in terms of the soul's passage through worldly experience. In fact, Isaacs claims that the adepts, in their quest for the "Ideal," also pay attention to the subtleties of sensory phenomena: "The world to them is a great repository of facts, physical and social, of which they propose to acquire a specific knowledge by transcendental methods" (127-8).

Love too, according to Crawford, represents a navigation of the soul versus body binary as it combines an aspiration towards the transcendental with sensual expression. The novel presents Isaacs's pursuit of Katharine as a site through which they both experience love as a spiritually transformative process. On the subject of love, Griggs offers the following philosophical musings:

But are not people always mistaken who think to find the perfect comprehended in the imperfect, the infinite enchained and made tangible in the finite? Bah! The same old story, the same old vicious circle ... the fruitless attempt to measure the harmonious circle of the soul by the angular square of the book.

(245)

The passage raises several questions about the futile human tendency to find the transcendental in the tangible “finite” – a search that can yield dissatisfying results. However, even as Griggs suggests that the “Ideal” can never be realised in concrete reality, he does not reject the possibility of exploring the same. He implies that though “fruitless,” these attempts to grasp an abstract truth through the physical world are the sole available means of imagining the “Ideal” (245). Griggs’s disappointed tone anticipates the tragic end of Isaacs’s earthly love. Nonetheless, the novel projects romantic love as an approximation of the “Ideal” in the earthly realm that gives an imperfect glimpse of salvation.

To frame sensual love as an access point to the “Ideal” was unusual and Olcott and Blavatsky criticised it: “Mr. Crawford makes ... the mistake of having his ideal Eastern adept ... meddling in the love affairs of the hero and heroine” (Olcott 1900: 395). And, this is where Crawford differed from the Theosophists – in his fiction, at least, he explores the relationship between physical and spiritual realms. His portrayal of a woman love-interest as the path to the “Ideal” also chimes with the Catholic idealisation of women – a trope central to the religion, as observed by James Emmett Ryan (2013: 14). Love then plays the same role as religion in enlightening characters, as Griggs mentions in *Ralstons*: “religion’s like love. It affects different people differently” (1893a: 55). In *Mr. Isaacs*, a yearning for love paves the way for religion. This is best depicted when Katharine approaches Griggs to be consoled about Isaacs’s departure on a mission (he leaves to save the Afghan fighter, Shere Ali, from a hunt conducted by the British officials). Griggs adopts an unusual mode to soothe Katharine. He recites Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* to her, with the hope that the collective reading of a spiritually enlightening text can temporarily relieve her sadness: “I began to read, and read on and on through the exquisite rise and fall of the stanzas, through the beautiful clear high thoughts which seem to come as a breath and a breeze from an unattainable heaven, from the *Nirvāṇa* we all hope for in our inmost hearts” ([1882] 1892: 254). Crawford implies that the mental images – the “beautiful clear high thoughts” – generated by the shared reading can allow access to the “Ideal” or a spiritual form of love (regardless of the belief system one holds).

Crawford possibly inserted *The Light of Asia* into this scene because it offered a familiar introduction to *nirvāṇa* for a Western audience. As Franklin has argued, the poem’s appeal lay in its interpretation of Buddhism that made it comprehensible to a Victorian Christian audience (2008: 43). Perhaps, Crawford hoped that his own writing could do the same for his readers. As I have suggested so far, Crawford’s work engages with and references Buddhism because, in his view, it imagines liberation via the “Ideal” in its purest form. Yet, as the lines above imply, the “heaven” or Absolute truth is fundamentally “unattainable.” That is, the “Ideal” can never be fully accessed until the soul is on the brink of achieving salvation. Though a sobering realisation, Crawford does not give up on the “Ideal;” instead, he shifts the focus to exploring *nirvāṇa*-in-life (to a degree). Placing his interpretation of Buddhist and Catholic views on the Idealism-materialism question in conversation, Crawford adopts a position that reads the two belief systems as endorsing a mystical exploration of “Pure Being” or the “Ideal,” with glimpses being perceptible in reality. The next section explores how this theological stance translates into the formal texture of his fiction.

Channelling the “Ideal” in Romance-Realism Genre

An interest in the spirit-body/Idealism-materialism question not only pervades Crawford’s non-fiction writings, it also informs the content and form of his novels. While Crawford’s fiction records contemporary theological debates, he presents these ideas in ways that are uniquely different from other religious writers. One technique through which he makes his religious views apparent is by transposing his voice onto the fictional narrator, Paul Griggs. As Crawford wrote to A. Bence Jones: “I am the real Paul Griggs of the story ... and the occasional allusions to my own history are for the most part true” (cited in Pilkington, 1961: 33). But rather than overemphasising his voice, Crawford deliberately does not let his views overshadow his works. Across his writings, he adopts a clear stance on not including prescriptive messages in fiction.

In this respect, Crawford found the contemporary novel of purpose to be excessively moralistic. In *The Novel: What It Is* (1893), his full-length treatise on his literary philosophy, Crawford states that “the purpose-novel is an odious attempt to lecture people who hate lectures, to preach at people who prefer their own church” (1893b: 17). Here, Crawford regards attempts to guide readers to be contrary to the primary purpose of fiction, which was entertainment. A novel, in his words, is “an intellectual artistic luxury” (9), and its aim is not to convert the readers but to draw them into an amusing world. Present in Crawford’s view is an imagined autonomous reader who is not infantilised but seen to take control of their reading experience and interpretations of a text. This attitude radically contrasts with comparable writers, such as Corelli, who incorporated prescriptive messages in their works.

Part of the reason Crawford views the novel as a “luxury” is because he accepts its status as a commodity that caters to readers’ needs for leisure. In keeping with the commercial logic of the mass-market, Crawford proposes that novels ought to entertain: fiction should “make our readers think – not too serious thoughts ... but, to think, and thinking, to see before them characters whom they might really like to resemble, acting in scenes in which they themselves would like to take a part” (23). Intriguingly, Crawford sets up a link between a novel’s capacity to entertain readers and its realistic aspects. He argues that novels should offer an immersive experience to the readers who will, in turn, absorb messages through over-identification with believable characters.

While realism assists the readers in relating to the plot by creating “an agreeable illusion” (46), an element of fantasy can further amplify a text’s immersive potential (Crawford’s preferred genre was clearly romance). The fictional setting, according to Crawford, should not only have realistic elements, it should primarily try to portray the “Ideal.” But instead of the “Ideal” being explicitly spelt out in a text, it must be presented as something worthy of being emulated. An engaging fictional world should thus seem legitimately real and “Ideal” enough to be aspired towards. In this way, Crawford attempts to merge both the real and the “Ideal,” realist features and romance in his works.¹⁷ Far from being antithetical, realism and romance are conceived of as uniquely symbiotic as he tries to find a vocabulary to incorporate both in the same text: “Why must a novel-writer be either a “realist” or a “romantist”? And, if the latter, why “romanticist” any more than “realisticist”? Why should a good novel not combine romance and reality in just proportions?” (45).

¹⁷ Here, I refer to the spiritual romance genre found in the works of several Victorian writers (such as Bulwer Lytton and Corelli).

Although Crawford was opposed to the Victorian version of preachy realism, he does not entirely reject realist aspects oriented towards entertainment (as evident in *Mr. Isaacs*).¹⁸ Crawford imagines well-rounded fiction as that which contains both a dynamic realism, which is “not flat and photographic,” and a romance “that is, of the earth” (44). His conception of the genres presupposes a fluidity between generic vocabularies: realism has to go beyond a mere allegiance to reality whereas the romance must remain grounded. This was possibly an attempt on Crawford’s part to work through the relationship between soul/“Ideal” and matter in formal terms; however, this is not all. Crawford asserts that in addition to realism and romance, a purely metaphysical element in the form of Idealism and religion (not as a prescriptive note but an acknowledgement of Spirit) should be present in the novel: the novel’s “idealism must be transcendent, not measured to man’s mind, but proportioned to man’s soul. Its religion must be of such grand and universal span as to hold all worthy religions in itself” (44). That he considers Idealism and religion as significant aspects of a fictional work demonstrates that his generic experiment is primarily oriented towards realising the “Ideal.” It is thus not surprising that Crawford even describes the act of novel-writing as a form of channelling the “Ideal”: “It has always seemed to me that the perfect novel, as it ought to be, exists somewhere in the state of the Platonic idea, waiting to be set down on paper by the first man of genius who receives a direct literary inspiration” (43).

Crawford handles realism and romance as generic elements that ought to gesture at the transcendental. The formal organisation of the chapters in *Mr. Isaacs* makes the turn to realism apparent. Usually, the chapters begin with slice-of-life snippets that satirise the behaviour of the British officials in India: their “Sabbatarian tendencies” ([1882] 1892: 136) on a Sunday and the banal rhythm of their lives as they spend days playing polo. At times, Crawford extends this ironic gaze to Indian subjects: “The Hindoo servant hates the cold” (138). An *Atlantic Monthly* reviewer noted that there is “a common-sense atmosphere” in the novel (“Mr. Isaacs” 1883: 410) – a grounded-ness in the everyday. However, even as the narrator pays attention to details, he rarely focuses on the motivation or psychological drives of characters. As the *Atlantic* review emphasised: the novel “does not lose itself in a microscopic study of details ... and no space is lost in discoursing upon the characters: these are simply placed before us with a bodily distinctness that cannot be evaded” (410). It is noteworthy that the reviewer registers the “bodily distinctness” of characters yet, as we are told, these textured details are glossed over. Ultimately, Crawford’s aim is to move beyond a consideration of the individuated mind and body to an exploration of a generalised consciousness.

Crawford does not entirely omit the body in the novel, but he does try to transcend its role in the pursuit of a higher consciousness. A similar tendency can be found in his framing of genres as the quest for the mystical “Ideal” underpins the unfolding of various romantic and realist plots in the novel. Elements of the adventure romance genre are present in the form of the tiger-hunt described in detail in the mid-section of the novel. Crawford also includes a geopolitical plot centred on saving the Afghan emir Shere Ali from being captured by British officials. However, these plots ultimately lead to a mystical end: the tiger-hunt ends with Katharine’s death (and salvation), and the plot to save Shere Ali leads to Isaacs’s initiation under Ram Lal’s tutelage. Ram Lal emerges as the common thread across these sub-plots – the beacon of Idealist thought who gives a larger purpose and meaning to these romantic quests.

¹⁸ Recently, Taeko Kitahara has argued that there are similarities between Henry James and Crawford’s supernatural stories (2006: 184). Yet, Crawford is no longer included as a pivotal figure in the American canon. In this regard, Moran argues that Crawford’s erasure can be attributed to the lack of “purely American themes and institutions in his novels” (1981: 59).

That the characters too represent these contradictory generic impulses within themselves is evident in the portrayal of Isaacs. By the close of the novel, Crawford portrays Isaacs as a flawed hero who embarks on the pursuit of *nirvāna*. The novel's realist tendencies can be traced in the kind of reformation he undergoes: Isaacs's views on gender and marriage are transformed through the course of the novel. Here, Crawford encodes a social message in the novel as he offers a regressive commentary on Islam and its treatment of gender: though the novel fetishises, and mostly heroises Isaacs, it undercuts his spiritual superiority by highlighting his "problematic" views on women. At the beginning, Isaacs describes women as "a thing of the devil" ([1882] 1892: 47) and endorses polygamy, in opposition to a monogamous Christian understanding of marriage as a spiritual union. The encounter with Katharine transforms his views, converting him into a monogamous man. He later comments: "The light of life is woman, the love of life is the love of woman; the light that pales not, the life that cannot die, the love that can know not any ending; *my* light, *my* life, and *my* love!" (245). Through the realist angle, the novel shows how a spiritually enlightened yet "barbaric" Muslim man is taught a "progressive" lesson about gender politics through the "pure" British woman.

The romance dilutes the realist aspect's judgmental commentary. Crawford presents Isaacs's conversion as a spiritual decision, a romantic search for the "Ideal" wherein the Muslim man finds salvation. By the end, Isaacs renounces the world and retires with Ram Lal, the mystical adept, in search of a higher truth. Isaacs is made to adopt a dual function in the realism-romance mix: he is both the subject to be reformed and the one who is worthy of Buddhist salvation. The question remains: why is the search for an "Ideal" reserved for Isaacs? How do we make sense of the sole Eastern character being singled out as in need of salvation?

By transposing his Idealism-materialism stance onto genres, Crawford thus inaugurates an unusual blend of generic elements: a romance that acknowledges reality and the body to the extent that the body itself partially becomes the vehicle for the romance. However, this generic framing also allows Crawford to incorporate a conservative commentary: in this triangulation of religions, a critical "realist" lens is reserved for Islam, while Buddhism and Christianity are seen to carry the promise of a religious and romantic "Ideal." Thus, Crawford's novel re-establishes religious hierarchies to reproduce an orientalist framing. Yet, his centring of a Muslim character and his "cosmopolitan" attempt to initiate cross-religious conversations sets his "mystical" writing apart from other Victorian occult works. As a voice that ventured into philosophical debates and formal experimentation, Crawford's works signify a theologically rich engagement with occultism, once immensely popular and now waiting to be rediscovered.

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