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‘A New Revelation of Divine Wisdom’: *L’Homme-Dieu* (1903) and the Initiatory Quest in Jean Delville’s Theosophical Paintings: *L’Amour des Âmes* (1900) and *Prométhée* (1907)¹

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Abstract

From 1900 to 1907, Jean Delville produced three career-defining works that marked a significant creative and intellectual development in his art and writing, influenced by his involvement in the esoteric Theosophical movement. This essay analyses the iconography of his *L’Amour des Âmes* (1900), *L’Homme-Dieu* (1903), and *Prométhée* (1907). It reveals the interconnections among these paintings and how they reflect key ideas that inspired Delville, particularly through the writings of Annie Besant and Édouard Schuré. Schuré’s *Les enfants de Lucifer* (1900) is analysed as a key text that offers an overall intellectual framework that informed Delville’s three Theosophical paintings. Concomitantly, Annie Besant’s *Esoteric Christianity* (1901) provided Delville with a new intellectual framework to develop a modern esoteric Christology that aligned with his artistic ideal to create a form of spiritual art that uplifts and transforms society.

Keywords

Jean Delville – Annie Besant – Édouard Schuré – light-bearers – symbolist art – *L’Art Social* – Ideal Beauty – the nude in art – Theosophy

Introduction

This study examines key artworks by the eminent Belgian Symbolist painter Jean Delville (1867–1953), created at the turn of the twentieth century. During a period of rapid economic and social transformation, Delville envisioned art as a powerful catalyst for spiritual and societal renewal. This vision is vividly expressed in three seminal works from the early twentieth century that explore themes of personal and collective spiritual regeneration: *L’Amour des Âmes* (1900), *L’Homme-Dieu* (1903), and *Prométhée* (1907).

The primary focus of this essay is Delville’s monumental painting *L’Homme-Dieu*, which is analysed alongside the iconographically related works *L’Amour des Âmes* and *Prométhée*, which were conceived contemporaneously. The analysis considers two key aspects: the formal theoretical foundations of Delville’s artistic practice and aesthetics framework; and the spiritual influences that informed his choice of subject matter.

¹ This paper was presented in part at the 2025 International Congress on Medieval Studies (Western Michigan University) conference. I am sincerely grateful to Dr Liana Cheney for her invaluable support and encouragement to present my research in the session titled “Mysterious Symbolism in Art and Literature: The Art of Revelations” and for her guidance and insights to further develop my research for publication. I am also indebted to Laurence Van Kerhoven, Curator of Painting at the Musea Brugge, for providing archival material relating to aspects of the current research. I am most grateful to Dr Juleen Eichinger for her expert editorial interventions in shaping and improving the final draft of this essay.

The discussion first explores *L'Homme-Dieu* in terms of its reception, intellectual and artistic contexts, iconography, and its significance within Delville's evolving spiritually orientated aesthetic. This study provides the first comprehensive, in-depth academic analysis of *L'Homme-Dieu*, which Delville regarded as one of his finest works and represents the culmination of his artistic and intellectual development, which began more than a decade earlier.² In 1900, Delville published his seminal book on art theory, *La Mission de l'Art*, which articulated his distinctive Idealist aesthetic and provided the intellectual foundation for his artistic practice in the early twentieth century. This was followed by several books and essays that further developed the themes expressed in his art. The intellectual framework provided by these writings is examined in this essay.

In these published works, Delville articulated his artistic principles through his concept of *L'Art social*. The connection between *L'Art social*, Ideal Beauty, and the nude forms the basis for understanding his artistic practice during this period. In Delville's work, the nude—expressed within the syntax of the Classical tradition—serves as the vehicle for conveying Ideal Beauty. In his paintings from this period, Delville employed nude figures, individually or collectively, to communicate transcendent narratives. For Delville, the expression and appreciation of Ideal Beauty through the nude, in turn, enables art to elevate the collective social consciousness by conveying spiritual values. The influence of Ideal Beauty on the social consciousness is the principal concept underlying his notion of *L'Art social*. This essay explores the interplay between *L'Art social*, Ideal Beauty, and the nude to provide a foundation for understanding Delville's artistic practice and the triad of works under discussion.

Furthermore, this study analyses the programmatic interrelationship among these paintings, which are underpinned by the Theosophical framework that shaped Delville's intellectual and artistic development in the early twentieth century. It also proposes an underlying narrative and iconographic connection between *L'Homme-Dieu* and *Prométhée*, alongside their shared themes with *L'Amour des Âmes*.

By 1900, Jean Delville stood at the beginning of a major new phase in his evolution as both an artist and a writer. That year proved highly auspicious for Delville: his painting *L'Amour des Âmes* won the silver medal at the Universal Exhibition in Paris; his seminal work on Idealist aesthetics, *La Mission de l'Art*, was published; he was appointed Professor of Life Classes at the prestigious Glasgow School of Art later that year; and he embarked on two major, artistically transformative painting projects, namely, *L'Homme-Dieu* and *Prométhée*.³

² The work is briefly discussed in the context of Delville's monumental art in Émilie Berger, 'Jean Delville et l'enjeu du "monumental"', in *Jean Delville (1867–1953): Maître de l'idéal*, ed. Denis Laoureux et al. (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2014), 106–121.

³ It is interesting to note that the Edouard Schuré observed, in the preface of his 1922 edition of *Les enfants de Lucifer*, a general shift in the intellectual culture of the time—toward a greater spiritual flowering that emerged at the start of the twentieth century: 'The year 1900 marked a critical moment of change in the intellectual and spiritual life of humanity. The dawn of the twentieth century indeed corresponds to a turning point in the entire historical evolution of Western civilization. It was the moment when the human spirit, weary of the exclusive analysis of matter and the tyrannical obsession with the external world, turned inward toward the inner World of the Soul, as toward the eternal centre of life and the sublime goal of its indestructible aspirations'. Édouard Schuré, *Les enfants de Lucifer (Drame Antique). La sœur gardienne (Drame moderne)* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin Et Cie, 1922), vii–viii.

This new phase in his career emerged from the preceding decade that was marked by the swift maturation of Delville's ideas in painting, poetry, and writing, alongside the coherent development of his distinctive Hermetic-Idealist form of art—namely, his *Esthétique Idéaliste*—firmly rooted in Classical aesthetics and contemporary esoteric traditions in art and philosophy.⁴ By the turn of the century, Delville was acknowledged as a successful, articulate, and exceptionally talented non-realist artist. His eventual recognition within *avant-garde* circles in the late 1890s, following years of rejection by influential Belgian *avant-garde* impresarios, marked a critical turning point in his career. Delville was regarded as a combative and polemical figure during Belgium's *fin de siècle*.⁵ His individualistic approach to his art, coupled with his vigorous advocacy of his Idealist cause, resulted in his exclusion from prominent artistic circles such as *Les XX* and subsequently *La Libre Esthétique* during the 1890s.

However, the 1898 exhibition of his acclaimed Idealist masterpiece, *L'École de Platon* (**Fig. 1**), silenced his critics and won many to his cause. This major work marked Delville's first significant breakthrough.⁶ Though excluded from exhibiting at the premier *avant-garde* forum, *La Libre Esthétique*, during the 1890s, Delville was later invited to publish a series of articles articulating his artistic philosophy in the influential artistic and literary magazine *L'Art Moderne*. This opportunity marked the cessation of hostility from its editors, notably Octave Maus, who had previously opposed him over the preceding five years.⁷ These articles laid the foundation for the publication of Delville's comprehensive Hermetic-Idealist manifesto, *La Mission de l'Art*, informed by esoteric Theosophy. Published in 1900, it was his second book.⁸ This work included a preface by the influential occultist and Theosophist Édouard Schuré.⁹ From that point, Delville's career increasingly embraced Theosophy as a theoretical and ontological framework, profoundly shaping his life, art, and writings until the end of his distinguished career. In the early 1900s, Delville published several pamphlets and books demonstrating his engagement with the Theosophical movement, notably *Le Mystère de l'Évolution ou de la Généalogie de L'Homme d'après la Théosophie* (1905) and *Dieu en Nous. Essai Théosophique d'Émancipation Spirituelle* (1905), both referenced in this study. He also produced the three significant, large-scale paintings inspired by Theosophy that will be the focus of this paper, namely, *L'Amour des Âmes* (1900, **Fig. 2**), *L'Homme-Dieu* (1903, **Fig. 3**), and *Prométhée* (1907, **Fig. 4**).

⁴ This period, and analysis of his *Esthétique Idéaliste*, is covered in detail in Brendan Cole, *Jean Delville, Art Between Nature and the Absolute* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 149–206.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of Delville's polemical writings during the 1890s, see Cole, *Jean Delville*, 38–59.

⁶ See Cole, *Jean Delville*, 307–354, for a detailed analysis of Delville's *École de Platon*.

⁷ Jean Delville, 'L'Esthétique Idéaliste', *L'Art Moderne* 18 (30 April 1899), 150–152; 'L'Esthétique Idéaliste', *L'Art Moderne* 21 (21 May 1899), 176–177; 'L'Esthétique Idéaliste', *L'Art Moderne* 24 (11 June 1899), 198–199; 'A Propos l'Esthétique Idéaliste', *L'Art Moderne* 30 (23 July 1899), 249.

⁸ Jean Delville, *La Mission de l'Art. Étude d'Esthétique Idéaliste*, Préface by Édouard Schuré (Brussels: Georges Balat, 1900).

⁹ Schuré wrote a lengthy review of the work, and of Delville, in 1900. See Édouard Schuré, 'Le Beau Esotérique', *L'Indépendance Belge* (4 February 1900), 5–6.

Exhibition and Reception of the *L'Homme-Dieu*

In a handwritten autobiographical note from late in his life, Delville recounts that he conceived *L'Homme-Dieu* and *Prométhée* concurrently before departing Brussels to assume his role as Professor of Life Classes at the Glasgow School of Art in 1900.¹⁰ His appointment was announced in November 1900.¹¹ He began creating studies for these works during this time in Scotland. He subsequently completed the final large-scale painting in his studio in 1903 at L'Avenue des Sept Bonniers, Forest, now a south-western suburb of Brussels, near Parc Duden.¹² The works developed through a series of drawings, oil sketches, and, particularly for *L'Homme-Dieu*, highly refined small-scale studies. From one of the finished oil studies for *L'Homme-Dieu*, dated 1900, it is evident that his conception for the work was fully realised already in the year he left for Glasgow (**Fig. 5**). *L'Homme-Dieu* was completed and first

¹⁰ See Delville, *Autobiographie*, Manuscript, 1944, Fonds Eggermont PA/AACB/2009–20: Archives confiées à Monsieur Pierre Poirier et données aux AACB par la fille de ce dernier, France Poirier, le 4.08.2009, 13.

¹¹ The sub-committee of the Glasgow School of Art announced in the meeting of the School Committee in November that Delville, by 'unanimous recommendation', seemed 'in every way Capable [*sic*] of fulfilling the requirements of the School'. See GSA Archives, *Minutes of the Glasgow School of Art Committee* (8 November, 1900), 379. His appointment was widely reported in the Belgian press, particularly since his application for a teaching post at the Brussels School of Fine Art was rejected. The notice in *Le Soir* summarised the circumstances: 'The Good Fortune of Not Being Appointed! — Such might be the title one could give to the account of the happy adventure that has just befallen one of our most talented painters, Mr. Jean Delville.

It is known that Mr. Delville had applied for one of the positions—so hotly contested—of professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels, and that he failed in the vote of the Municipal Council last Monday. He was deeply unhappy about it... all the more so as he attributed his failure to the reputation of the sorcerer that had been unjustly attached to him. What can one do? One does not go unpunished for having been a mage and lieutenant to Sâr Péladan. He had reached the point of despair when, the day before yesterday, chance brought him into contact with the Arts Committee of Glasgow, Scotland, which was passing through Brussels. This committee was seeking an eminent artist willing to accept the post of professor of painting and drawing (advanced course) at that Academy, one of the foremost in Europe. They learned of Mr. Delville's misfortune, whose talent they already knew; they offered him the position—and Mr. Delville accepted, the inconvenience of expatriation for five months of winter being amply compensated by the very great honour—and by the level of remuneration, entirely commensurate with the importance of the post.

Since then, Mr. Delville has ceased to curse the Municipal Council: had it appointed him, the Glasgow position would have escaped him. And now he blesses it with all his might. How good is misfortune at times!' Anon., 'Petite gazette', *Le Soir* (2 November 1900), 2.

¹² See Delville, *Autobiographie*, 13: 'It was during my stay in Glasgow that, apart from the portraits—those of the *Scottish Lady* and the *Irish Lady*—I conceived the sketches for *L'Homme-Dieu* (1901–1903) and for *Prométhée*, works which I already had in mind when leaving Brussels ... Despite the little time that remained to me outside my teaching duties, I succeeded in executing these two sketches. But the two canvases themselves I completed in my studio at Forest'.

exhibited at the *Salon Triennal de Bruxelles*, which opened in September 1903. Delville's *Prométhée* was completed in 1907 and first exhibited at the *Salon Triennal de Bruxelles* in August of that year. Delville completed his *Amour des Âmes* before his departure to Scotland, which was exhibited at the *Salon de la Libre Esthétique* in March 1900. This was the first (and apparently only) time one of his works was exhibited at that influential artistic forum.

The substantial dimensions of these paintings are striking: *L'Homme-Dieu* measures 5.5 by 5.0 metres (**Fig. 6**), and *Prométhée* measures 4.5 by 2.5 metres (**Fig. 7**). Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes* measures 2.58 by 1.5 metres, smaller, but no less impressive. The first two mentioned were created to be housed in a public venue. The catalogue entry for the *Salon Triennal de Bruxelles* in 1903 indicates that *L'Homme-Dieu* was intended as a preparatory study (*esquisse*) for a significantly larger version, planned to measure approximately 15 by 15 metres, for a grand public setting—a vision that was never realised.¹³ This ambition to place the work in a public setting was published in the catalogue entry (no. 278) for the *Salon de Bruxelles*, which stated: '*L'Homme-Dieu*. Sketch for a monumental painting to be executed, approximately twice the size, either for a Palace of Justice, a Basilica, or any other building with a highly social purpose'.¹⁴ Similarly the annotation for his *Prométhée* stated that it was, 'a fragment of decorative painting intended for a temple of science, a university, an institute'.¹⁵

After being generally well received at the *Salon Triennal* in Brussels in 1903, *L'Homme-Dieu* was displayed three years later at the *Salon Triennal de Gand* in Ghent. Most notably, it was selected to represent Belgium at the prestigious *Universal Exhibition* in Ghent in 1913. The painting received mostly favourable press reviews after its debut in Brussels. In its 1903 review, the *Journal de Bruxelles* offered an insightful analysis of Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu*, celebrating the work as a transcendent fusion of mysticism and technical skill in depicting the Divine figure reigning over a scene of human suffering and, moreover, extolling the painting's striking execution and profound thematic ambition. The critic of the *Journal* acknowledged Delville's artistic conviction and talent that could be appreciated even among those unmoved by its religious or philosophical undertones:

Room III is entirely dedicated to the grand canvas by Mr. Jean Delville ... *L'Homme-Dieu*, a sketch for a monumental painting, the highly acclaimed work of Mr. Jean Delville, presents a kind of mystic tempest enveloping souls as well as bodies and clouds in an apotheosis of broad, swirling volutes. A sort of human wave, where bodies are drawn with the artist's characteristic extreme skill in delicate, rounded contours ... The Man-God dominates in the form of a large figure outstretched in the form of a cross, bathed in symbolic violet and green hues, naked ... beneath its vast garment of light. A 'mere sketch' of an extraordinary work that one hopes to see definitively completed, the piece reveals the artist's distinctive biting coloration, with his mastery shining through in 'passages' of prestigious execution. All distresses, all ages, and all souls are truly contorted in the bodies of women, men, and children—slender, refined, as if polished and ambered by a light from beyond. One may not love such a work, but it is impossible to

¹³ See Clovis Piérard, 'Jean Delville Peintre, Poète, Esthéticien', *Mémoire et Publications de la Société des Arts et des lettres du Hainault* (1971–1973), 220.

¹⁴ *Salon Triennal de Bruxelles, Catalogue* (Bruxelles, 1903), 42. Catalogue entry number 278.

¹⁵ See Anon., 'Arts, Sciences et Lettres', *Journal de Bruxelles* (19 September 1907), 3.

deny it (even for those least attuned to religious, mystical, or philosophical emotions) the full respect commanded by its lofty intent, persistent labour, and undeniable talent.¹⁶

Another highly supportive review in *L'Indépendance Belge* praised *L'Homme-Dieu* as a monumental achievement, highlighting Delville's integration of modern sculptural influences with painting. The review underscores the painting's commanding presence, noting its capacity to engage viewers through its vivid portrayal of human suffering and divine compassion, achieved through Delville's evident talent:

The influence of our modern school of sculpture on the boldest of our painters has already been noted, but never has it been as strikingly evident as in the colossal preparatory drawing of *The Man-God* by Jean Delville, which commands the attention of visitors in Room III ... Jean Delville unleashes a torrent of Disappointments and Sufferings, Agonies and Curses, to which The Man-God, extending His arms in a broadly hieratic gesture, offers at the very least the refuge of His immortal Mercy; and all these desperate forms are anatomised with draughtsmanship of such penetrating rigor that it surpasses the relentless cruelty of a scalpel. The overall impression is striking. This sketch for a decorative painting, the artist intends for some monument of 'eminently social purpose'. Whatever its future may be, there is undoubtedly a tremendous artistic endeavour here, in which talent, mastery, and determination are decisively manifested.¹⁷

¹⁶ E.J., 'Le Salon Triennal', *Journal de Bruxelles* (24 October 1903), 2.

¹⁷ C.T., 'Théâtres et Beaux-Arts. La Triennale de Bruxelles', *L'Indépendance Belge* (27 September 1903), 3.

The work was widely reviewed in the press at the time. The review in *Le Peuple* was largely complimentary of Delville's effort: 'We admired the immense grisaille by Jean Delville, which was not visible on the day of the private view. In its symbolism, the canvas pleases through the extraordinary movement of this formidable cluster of human beings carried in a surge of pain towards the radiant figure of the supplicant on Golgotha. The Man-God smiles upon suffering humanity. Herein lies a very noble idea which the artist has treated with great warmth, talent, and vitality'. Anon., 'Au Salon Triennal', *Le Peuple: Organe quotidien de la démocratie socialiste* (15–September 1903), 3.

The review in *Le Vingtième Siècle* wrote: 'The large decorative panel by Delville, "L'Homme-Dieu" (room III), is assuredly a work of art: through the nobility of the charitable thought that animates it, through its beauty of line and suppleness of rhythm, it constitutes a very high achievement of plastic beauty and salutary emotion. The august inclination of the Christ of goodness and consolation responds to the immense imploring gestures that rise from this tortured humanity; and in this mystical union one discerns the plenitude of pardons and eternal promises. Broad sentiment, nervous yet supple execution, fine harmony of tinted greys; the definitive realisation of such a sketch would endow our country with a lofty manifestation of monumental art'. Anon., 'Le Salon Triennal', *Le Vingtième Siècle* (8 September 1903), 2.

Le Soir remarked that 'The large grisaille by M. Delville, *L'Homme-Dieu*, is perhaps the "highlight" of the exhibition—the piece to which, in any self-respecting exhibition, all curiosities are drawn'. See Anon., 'Le Salon. L'ouverture—Le Vernissage', *Le Soir* (6 September 1903), 2; and also Anon., 'Au Salon', *Le Petit Bleu du Matin* (27 September 1903), 3.

La Réforme remarked that 'One of the works in the exhibition that will assuredly be noticed

In his autobiography, Delville noted the broadly positive reception of the work: ‘The work has made a profound impression in the world of artists and critics alike. Tardieu, in *L’Indépendance Belge*, published a highly laudatory article. Lambotte, upon seeing the canvas, exclaimed: “This is a refreshing change from painters who see only the material in painting!” In short, the painting sparked lively discussion, yet all admired its form and conception’.¹⁸

However, a more critical review in *Le Petit bleu du Matin* tempered its admiration for Delville’s technical skill with significant reservations about the painting’s thematic and emotional limitations, observing that the painting was too heavily derivative of a Symbolist and allegorical tradition that was seen as increasingly out of step with modern naturalist preferences. Their trenchant criticism was no doubt influenced in this regard by the prevailing influence and impact of *La Libre Esthétique* and *Les XX*. The review also highlighted concerns about the painting’s thematic intent, perceived as obscure and inaccessible, which resulted in contemporary audiences remaining emotionally distant from its abstract and intellectual framework:

Legendary and symbolist painting has few adherents nowadays. It has produced a grand allegorical and decorative canvas by Mr. Delville, *L’Homme-Dieu*, a somewhat ambiguous symbol of charity and justice, in which all the qualities of the elegant draftsman that distinguish Mr. Delville are manifest, and where one can once again admire the rare and precious talent of this artist who, amidst the admitted and proclaimed flatness of most of our painters, has protested through a noble devotion to intelligence and thought. Yet, despite this considerable effort and this undeniably valuable work of art, the spectator remains unmoved, experiencing only an admiration born of reasoning. This may be because allegory no longer speaks to us, because our modern hearts remain indifferent to its abstractions and outdated conventions, preferring an art form that touches us more directly.¹⁹

This review touched on many aspects concerning Delville’s artistic approach, including the fact that it implies that he appeared out of step with the direction of contemporary artistic preferences and misread the favoured artistic taste of his intended audience. The review highlights, moreover, issues relating to Delville’s reputation during the twentieth century where his artistic position and influence may have appeared reactionary, even anachronistic, and floundering in the face of revolutionary artistic trends that were developing at the same time, which would quickly assume the place of the official *avant-garde*, including Fauvism, Cubism, and German Expressionism. In terms of his pursuit to create meaningful, cerebral, large-scale allegoric works, Delville was undoubtedly an outlier in the contemporary Belgian art scene. However, despite these influential artistic trends, Delville never wavered in his commitment to creating art that prioritised meaning and intellectual depth, which he pursued to the very end of his long career.

is the immense sketch by M. Jean Delville, in which innumerable and wretched human beings stretch their supplicating forms towards the Man-God’. Champal, ‘Le Salon de Bruxelles. I’, *La Réforme: organe de la démocratie libérale* (12 September 1903), 1.

¹⁸ Delville, *Autobiographie*, 13.

¹⁹ Anon., ‘Au Salon’, *Le Petit bleu du Matin* (27 September 1903), 3.

When the work was exhibited at the *Salon de Gand* three years later, Delville recalled, in his autobiography, his personal encounter with the Belgian King Leopold II. Given the detailed description of this encounter (here quoted in full), one can conclude that the value of the King's praise for his painting meant a great deal to Delville—even though his contemporaries might have read it otherwise, given the conservative taste traditionally associated with Royalty. This encounter highlights Delville's readiness to challenge authority in his pursuit of greater recognition for his artistic vision to create large-scale, narrative-driven works intended for prominent public spaces. Delville promoted these ideals despite the challenges of operating in an art world that was dominated by predominantly more popular, smaller, commercially orientated realist works. In this extract Delville forthrightly addressed the King regarding the Belgian government's lack of support for large-scale public works of art, to the astonishment of the attending dignitaries:

Three years later, the work was exhibited at the *Salon Triennial* in Ghent. The government had made admirable arrangements. King Leopold II, the second King of the Belgians, accompanied by his ministers and a host of official figures, made it a point to attend the opening. The exhibiting artists were invited to stand before their works during the royal visit. The Salon was significant and noteworthy, though the numerous rooms consisted, for the most part, of small genre paintings and landscapes. The King had been led through the galleries for over an hour when, at last, the entire group of dignitaries following him entered the room where *L'Homme-Dieu* was prominently displayed. I was presented with the customary courtesies; the crowd gathered before the immense work (5m x 5m). The King stepped back to better view the whole, and everyone followed with deference. He was heard to proclaim loudly, 'Ah! Gentlemen, here at last is great art, is it not?' while gazing at the work. I explained its meaning: human suffering ... 'Yes', he said, 'it is grand, it is beautiful'. I seized the opportunity to say, 'Sire, unfortunately, the artist who creates 'grand' work is not much encouraged by the government in Belgium ...' At that, I saw the King turn, adjusting his monocle, and, fixing his gaze on the group of officials, declare loudly with clear intent, 'Well, the government is quite mistaken!' A moment of astonishment passed among the dignitaries, among whom was Mr. Verlant, and the King, while congratulating me, warmly shook my hand ... But the government did not stir ...²⁰

The overall reception of Delville's painting suggests that the work was on the whole critically admired primarily for its display of technical skill and ambitious theme but struggled to achieve the universal public admiration he might have sought. One can, however, emphasise that Delville's focus on large-scale, idea-based art meant that he was an artist pushing against prevailing trends, which potentially contributed to the lack of governmental and widespread public support. This was possibly also due to bureaucratic inertia or differing cultural priorities. His public admission that his approach to creating 'grand' public works of art that found no

²⁰ Delville, *Autobiographie*, 13. Several reviews of Delville's painting were published in response to the work exhibited at the *Salon de Gand* in 1906. See Anon., 'Le Salon Triennal de Gand', *Le Matin* (27 August 1906), 1; Timon, 'Le Salon Triennal de Gand', *Le Matin* (25 August 1906), 3; Sander Pierron, 'Le Salon de Gand', *L'Indépendance Belge* (28 August 1906), 3; and Dixit, 'Le Salon de Gand', *La Réforme: organe de la démocratie libérale* (31 August 1906), 1.

favour by the State appeared, in the end, to be a prescient remark in view of the fate of his *L'Homme-Dieu*, as we will see further on.

Delville's Challenge to Secure a Public Placement of *L'Homme-Dieu*

It is evident that at this stage of his career, Delville faced systemic challenges in securing institutional backing for his ambitious works. His intention for both *L'Homme-Dieu* and *Prométhée* was that they be exhibited in prominent public venues, an aspiration that, as noted, was never fully realised as initially envisaged. Delville first sought to secure a place for the work in a Brussels church, considering the *Église Notre-Dame de la Chapelle* in the capital (**Fig. 8**). However, neither the government nor the clergy appeared to be willing to fund such a grand project, and this ambition was ultimately abandoned.²¹ In his autobiography, Delville suggests that another reason may have been the clergy's and Catholic press's criticism of, or outright aversion to, the work, particularly its explicit depiction of nudity:

... I searched around in Belgium for a religious or civic building where it could be placed. I found a location on the wall of the triumphal arch inside the Church of the Chapel in Brussels. But there, too, the prejudice of ecclesiastical authorities against artistic nudity—those who fill churches with bland paintings from the St. Luke school and other pious drivel—proved an obstacle. The same thing happened at the old church in Forest, where the priest flatly declared: 'Never will nudity enter my church!' The poor man seemed oblivious to the fact that the entire Vatican in Rome is adorned with nudes by Italian Renaissance artists, and that the Pope himself says Mass in front of Michelangelo's nudes decorating the altar and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel!²²

At the Universal Exhibition in Ghent (1913), some Catholic clergy urged their congregants to avoid the exhibition hall on grounds of its 'unorthodox' concept.²³ Delville recalled their reaction: 'It is true that *L'Homme-Dieu* faced attacks from certain priests. One of them, more zealot than artist, even went so far as to urge the faithful from the pulpit not to set foot in the gallery where *L'Homme-Dieu* was displayed, claiming it was an unorthodox concept! The Catholic newspapers joined in the chorus ...'²⁴

It is unsurprising that the Catholic Church rejected Delville's offer to place *L'Homme-Dieu* in an ecclesiastical setting, given his sharp polemical critiques of the Church and its perceived preference for inferior religious art, as expressed in *La Mission de l'Art* (1900). In a sweeping passage, Delville wrote a caustic attack on the papacy and conservatism of the Church, implying

²¹ See Piérard, 'Jean Delville Peintre, Poète, Esthéticien', 220.

²² Jean Delville, 'Autobiographie', Archives d'Art contemporaine Belgique, (AA CB) 23792/1–4 5–8, 12–13, emphasis in original.

²³ The work was highlighted in a review of the work that appeared that year in the *Journal De Bruxelles*: 'J. Delville presents us with a vast composition, *L'Homme-Dieu*, depicting the frenzy of a humanity tormented by its yearning for justice, over which towers, sovereignly calm and divinely merciful, the figure of the Man-God. In this work, as in the artist's other panels—such as *Prométhée dérobant le feu du ciel*—one must praise the mastery of drawing and the fine ordering of the composition, further emphasised by the refinement of the chromatic treatment'. *Journal De Bruxelles* (14 July 1913), 1.

²⁴ Delville, 'Autobiographie', 12.

that it was no more than a political organisation that hid the true light of spirituality behind the orthodoxy of ritual and devotion. Moreover, he criticised the Roman Church for distorting religion through ignorant devotion, flawed rituals, and ‘errors’ in the Mass, turning it into a political, materialistic institution rather than a universal ideal rooted in love and science. He asserted that Roman orthodoxy stifled ‘divine Christianity’, with its ideal of ‘universality through Love and Knowledge’, and suppressed sacred knowledge and truth while condemning Beauty itself:

The narrow-mindedness and pettiness of ignorant devotions, the misunderstanding of the ritual significance of the Roman Church, the constant papal changes to the practice of the Mass, the falsifications, and all sorts of errors have turned religion, in both practice and understanding, not into the realization of the great ideal of universality through Love and Knowledge, but into a political organization of a materialised faith. For a long time, divine Christianity has been gasping under the shadows of Roman orthodoxy, with political papacies seizing the keys to lock away the most essential truths. And this same religion, which has banished sacred knowledge, has ended up condemning Beauty itself!²⁵

As we will discuss below, Delville was a strong advocate for a transcendent spirituality based on the personal experience of the Divine—which is realised through individual effort. It is possible to assume that his critique of institutional religion was based on this perspective, with its attendant limitations that he highlighted throughout his writings. For example, in his *Dieu en Nous* (later published in *Le Christ reviendra*), Delville critiqued the bourgeois concept of an anthropomorphic and separate God that was viewed merely as a force supporting the social and religious *status quo* and was shaped in their own self-image. Instead, Delville felt that this understanding, or form of belief, dismissed the possibility of a divine understanding derived from personal, inner spiritual experiences accessible to spiritually liberated individuals, as was the case in the early Church:

... the idea of an anthropomorphic and separate God has led men, whether priests or laypeople, to commit unimaginable atrocities. For them, knowledge of God is entirely confined within a Dogma, and outside the theological tenets approved by the Councils, it has deemed impossible to have a conception of God that, nonetheless, the inner experience of the Divine can offer to free and pure individuals. In truth, there is religious error and religious truth. Religious error clings blindly to the outward forms of religion, to the dead letter, to misunderstood dogmas. It fosters devotional distortion, the rote repetition of self-centred prayers, sectarian intolerance, and fanaticism. This religious error stems from a false conception of the Divine. For the vast majority of those I call ‘believers’, doesn’t the idea of God often align with a power that serves to protect the internal or external politics of the State or to uphold the reign of capitalism? The believing bourgeoisie has made God in its own image! We know how this conception, blasphemous to the highest degree, contradicts the teachings of the early Church itself, which was *communist*.²⁶

²⁵ Delville, *La Mission de l’Art*, 107–108.

²⁶ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra, Le Christ en Face de l’Église et de la Science* (Paris: Editions

Delville's contemptuous critique of the Roman Church, which he accused of stifling the universal ideals of divine Christianity through its dogmatic orthodoxy, is echoed in the writings of Annie Besant, whom Delville had recently encountered through the Theosophical movement (discussed below), which most likely emboldened his views. Delville echoed Besant's dismay at the Church's abandonment of its mystical and esoteric roots, arguing that this betrayal left spiritual seekers adrift in a barren landscape of rigid doctrine. In her seminal work, *Esoteric Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries* (published around 1901, shortly after Delville first met her), Besant articulates a critique that resonates deeply with Delville's condemnation of the Church's suppression of sacred knowledge and beauty. Her analysis, grounded in a demand for intellectual rigour and moral integrity, underscores the Church's failure to nurture the spiritual and intellectual needs of its followers, driving away those who could not reconcile their conscience with its crude teachings. This shared rejection of the materialistic and authoritarian tendencies of institutionalised religion forms a bridge between Delville's and Besant's critiques, as seen in her sharp reflections on this matter:

Christianity, having lost its mystic and esoteric teaching, is losing its hold on a large number of the more highly educated ... It is patent to every student of the closing forty years of the last century, that crowds of thoughtful and moral people have slipped away from the churches, because the teachings they received there outraged their intelligence and shocked their moral sense ... Everyone who carefully studies the phenomena presented will admit that men of strong intellect have been driven out of Christianity by the crudity of the religious ideas set before them, the contradictions in the authoritative teachings, the views as to God, man, and the universe that no trained intelligence could possibly admit ... The rebellion against popular Christianity was due to the awakening and the growth of conscience; it was the conscience that revolted, as well as the intelligence, against teachings dishonouring to God and man alike, that represented God as a tyrant, and man as essentially evil, gaining salvation by slavish submission.²⁷

Given Delville's pronounced opposition to the Church's doctrinal conservatism, it is difficult to understand why he considered placing *L'Homme-Dieu* in an ecclesiastical setting, unless he believed his art could reform the expressive limitations he perceived in the contemporary Catholic establishment, a possibility explored further below. Consequently, *L'Homme-Dieu*

Théosophiques, 1913), 277–278, emphasis in original.

²⁷ Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity. The Lesser Mysteries* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1901), 37–38. Delville echoes this monotheistic conception of an abstract tyrannical God when he wrote, in his *Le Christ reviendra*, 273: 'It is almost always with a vague sense of sacred terror or utter helplessness that the human mind has flung itself, as though adrift, into the ocean of a supernatural immensity—terrible, inconceivable, an abyss of inaccessible splendour in which incomprehension loses itself in the void and the godlike spectre fades away. This vagueness and this void are sustained by the prevailing religions, which have always sought to emphasise the unbridgeable gulf that exists between God and man. He is a God whom men may fear, but whom they can never comprehend or truly feel. He is a God conceived in ignorance and for ignorance, a God of domination and despotism, a personal God who is surely the most terrifying image of the most absolute and abstract Egoism'.

remained stored in Delville's studio for nearly forty years, unacquired by the state or displayed publicly, until he donated it to the city of Bruges, where it was intended for the *Salle des Pas-Perdus* in the *Palais de Justice* (Fig. 9, see Appendix A).²⁸ It was ultimately housed in the *Groeninge Museum* in Bruges. In a candid letter from 1951, two years before his death, Delville confided in his friend Henri Mortiaux about the difficulties and frustrations he faced in securing a permanent public placement for *L'Homme-Dieu*. With a blend of resignation and persistent hope for a resolution, Delville outlined the bureaucratic and logistical obstacles that hindered the painting's placement in a public institution. This correspondence underscores Delville's deep attachment to the painting and his firm belief in its aesthetic and artistic significance, which he considered among his finest works:

L'Homme-Dieu, as you know, I gifted to the City of Bruges about eight or ten years ago, on the explicit condition that it be displayed in one of the city's public monuments. The city accepted the gift. They looked for a suitable location and tried to place the work in the Bruges Painting Museum, but its size (5x5 meters) made that impossible. Then, they considered placing it in the Palace of Justice, and I was on board with the mayor's plan. Everything seemed to be falling into place, but since the War, a new president of the Palace of Justice has taken over, and he decided it could not be moved inside the building. Since then, things have stalled—complete silence. That is where I stand with *Bruges-la-Morte!* Still, before I die (which will not be long now, I hope), I would like to know the fate of my work, which I consider, from an aesthetic and artistic standpoint, one of my finest.²⁹

'L'Initiation de la Sagesse universelle':

Delville's effort to renovate traditional Christian Art

From an exoteric perspective, Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu* overtly depicts Christian themes through its portrayal of a Christ-like figure. However, as will become evident, the intended meaning of the work draws upon a distinctly different spiritual tradition, based on Delville's commitment to esoteric Theosophy. This duality creates a deliberate ambivalence in how the painting was meant to be interpreted. Delville embraced Christ's teachings while questioning the institutional framework of the established Church, which led to significant issues regarding his relationship with organised religion (discussed above), its doctrines, and the artistic preferences it endorsed. A clearer understanding of his position *vis-à-vis* these matters—particularly the artistic preferences of the Church that will be examined here—reveals a greater understanding of the intellectual and spiritual framework underpinning *L'Homme-Dieu*, and Delville's artistic programme underlying this work.

As noted above, Delville articulated his stance towards the established Church in sharply adversarial terms. His polemics against the Catholic Church likely alienated its authorities. Nonetheless, his vision to revitalise the Christian message through Theosophy, particularly as

²⁸ Delville petitioned the Mayor of the City of Bruges, Victor Van Hoestenbergh, in a letter dated Mons, 21 May 1939 (see Fig. 9) to have the painting placed in the *Salle des Pas-Perdus*. The letter is part of the Delville collection in the *Groeningemuseum* in Bruges. See Appendix A for transcript.

²⁹ Jean Delville, 'Letter to Henri Mortiaux', 1 January 1951, Private Collection. I am grateful to Mme Miriam Delville for providing a transcript of this letter.

articulated in Annie Besant's writings, bolstered his confidence in defending his artistic and philosophical stance. Delville's polemics targeted not only the ecclesiastical establishment but also the type of art it commissioned and favoured for its buildings. As much as he challenged conservative realist trends in art through his forthright polemics in the 1890s, Delville now critiqued contemporary religious art with equal, if not greater, vigour. In the following passage, which is worth quoting in full, he voices a scathing critique of the state of Christian art and its relationship with the Church, and reveals deep-seated frustrations and disillusionment with the decline of religious artistic practice that, in his view, lacked innovation and failed to express spiritual and artistic values embodied in the transcendent Ideal of Beauty that he valued:

Indeed, the very religion that has banished sacred knowledge has ultimately come to reject Beauty itself! Since the munificent and fruitful patronage of the Renaissance, the Church has abandoned its concern for aesthetic values. Thenceforth, religious art has degenerated with each passing day. Contemporary Christian imagery is the most insipid that can be conceived, representing the very embodiment of artistic nothingness. Artists of so-called 'Christian art' have debased religious inspiration to the coarsest and most foolish elements of bigotry. It is the reign of absolute, insufferable banality.

The spirit of the Church no longer comprehends the ideal, and Christian art has become one of its shames, bordering on sacrilege. The degradation is complete. The religious soul of these times is incapable of conceiving Beauty, remaining ossified in obsolete conventionalism and the most mediocre realism. The hypocritical scandalization with which the Church shrouds the nude is the very principle of its artistic decline. It was inevitable that it would descend into such poverty. The veiling of spiritual truth has led to the veiling of the holiest of forms: the human form! The narrowing of psychic faculties has brought about the annihilation of religious *inspiration*. The disfigurement of religion has given rise to artistic ugliness. Religions have the art they deserve. Art and Religion are inseparable. The Princes of the modern Church should never forget this. Instead of allowing Christian temples to be profaned by the monstrous banalities and distressing ugliness of the Saint-Luc and Beuron schools—those factories of sacrilege—the high dignitaries would better fulfil their spiritual duty by entrusting sacred images to the genius of inspired artists. It is evident that the concept of 'religious' or 'Christian' art cannot rise from its ashes if its source of inspiration is reduced to the dogmatic and conventional notions of the contemporary Church.³⁰

Delville's critique of institutional religious art was strategically aimed at advocating for its replacement with his own form of spiritual art, specifically the Idealist art for which he was already renowned: 'Religious art will henceforth be replaced by *universal idealistic art*, a sign of a new spiritualisation'.³¹

Delville advanced his case for spiritual art by asserting that it should aspire to a higher purpose beyond sensory appeal, in its purest form, elevating the spirit 'to a superior vision of

³⁰ Delville, *La Mission de L'Art*, 108, emphasis in original: The Editors of *L'Art Moderne* were sufficiently impressed with this perspective that they quoted at length this section from his book, without comment. See Anon., 'L'Église et L'Art', *L'Art Moderne* 37 (16 September 1900), 297–298.

³¹ Delville, *La Mission de L'Art*, 110, emphasis in original.

life'.³² He posited that art's purpose is to awaken the inner life of the spirit, but if it fails in this aim, it has no societal value. Furthermore, he wrote:

... when, at last, art fails to remind the human soul of its inner and divine aspirations for Love, Charity, and Light, then it is better to abolish it, for it becomes the cause of a great and deplorable waste of individual and social energy. Art that does not inspire thought, does not purify, and, in a word, does not elevate our soul above the vain things of the earth, is a useless art.³³

Delville surely had the new initiatory framework of *esoteric Christianity*, expressed through the tradition of contemporary Theosophy, in mind when he viewed the tradition of contemporary Christian Art as being overly realist and materialistic and therefore an empty expression of the Divine—as a disservice to the message of Christ and the Christian ideal:

Among the various forms of aesthetic perversion or decline, there is one that merits particular attention. This is the religious materialism that some still dare to call 'Christian art' in our time. It is well known that the role of the contemporary Church in art has thus far been lamentable, if not culpable. Modern religion, with its orthodox and realist mysticism, has brought about the materialization of the evangelical Mystery, placing it in contradiction with the pure Christian ideal ever since it rejected from its core the sacred esoteric initiation, which is its very foundation.³⁴

Instead, Delville championed an artistic practice that embraced universal spiritual ideals, reconnecting with the pure essence of the Christian message, 'It is the Initiation of Universal Wisdom, ever living and eternally indestructible, for though it may be banished from fanatical dogmas and pragmatic rituals to preserve ecclesiastical prerogatives, it finds heroic refuge in the luminous intimacy of rare souls, Christian in the manner of Christ, the divine initiator of immortal theosophies'.³⁵

Delville's ideas were certainly contentious within the context of contemporary religious orthodoxy, yet through his writings, poetry, and art, he sought to revive the 'Ancient Wisdom' of Theosophy (the 'secret doctrine') to reinvigorate the Christian ideal, fostering an inner connection to the Christ concept as a divine expression of 'Love and Light':

Christ is called *Love* and *Light*. The Spirit of God, the Universal Word, radiates upon all humanity ... The present Church, veiled to the point of obscurity, refuses to acknowledge this truth, into which it will ultimately cast itself if it one day chooses purity over power. It has suppressed the light of divine knowledge in darkness. Yet that light will absorb it into its inextinguishable source. This light is already growing, vibrant with Love and Knowledge, not to destroy dogmas, but to vivify them, to illuminate them, to render them more translucent, and to transform the dull stone they form into a magnificent diamond of dazzling psychic illumination, capable of a new palingenesis for humankind. Did not

³² Delville, *La Mission de L'Art*, 98.

³³ Delville, *La Mission de L'Art*, 98–99.

³⁴ Delville, *La Mission de L'Art*, 99–100.

³⁵ Delville, *La Mission de L'Art*, 100.

Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity—which is none other than a new revelation of Divine Wisdom, the Science of the Mysteries—say to the sectarians of Pharisaic clericalism: ‘Woe to you who have seized the key to knowledge and, not having entered its sanctuaries yourselves, have also barred others from entering’.³⁶

It appears that Delville sought to revitalise traditional Christian art by broadening its purpose through a vision of transcendent art grounded in the Ideal and spiritual beauty. This concept is pivotal to understanding the aesthetic intent of *L’Homme-Dieu*, which serves as Delville’s artistic testament to a reformed, ‘Christianised Idealist art’, informed by Theosophy’s ‘universal wisdom’. Although *L’Homme-Dieu* might initially seem to depict a conventional biblical narrative, its deeper meaning is informed by the esoteric Theosophical principles embedded within it, largely drawn from the writings of Annie Besant, as will be explored in detail below.

Furthermore, the monumental scale of *L’Homme-Dieu*—and the even grander dimensions intended for the final work—formed part of Delville’s strategy to achieve a specific impact in its envisioned public setting. His aim in displaying works publicly was not rooted in personal promotion but, rather, in a commitment to creating art that could profoundly influence the public consciousness. Delville believed that art was a highly influential means by which the collective consciousness of society could be uplifted and transformed through the intuitive engagement with art and its expression of Ideal or spiritual Beauty. This was the foundation of his notion of *L’Art social*.

L’Art Social: The Cornerstone of Delville’s Esthétique Idéaliste

Despite Delville’s initial failure to find a place in a public building for his huge *L’Homme-Dieu* and *Prométhée*, he was never deterred in his ambition to create large-scale public works of art. In fact, Delville’s ability effectively to convey his ideas on a grand scale, exceptional for its time, was a consistent hallmark of his artistic output from early in his career, most notably in *L’École de Platon*, which measures over 6 metres in width. His adoption of a large-scale format underscored his resolute ambition to create socially transformative artworks for public buildings, an ambition he pursued with vigour and considerable success in subsequent years. This became a defining characteristic of his work in the early twentieth century, most evident in the five monumental panels of *La Justice à travers les Ages* installed in the *Cour d’Assises* of Joseph Poelaert’s imposing *Palais de Justice* in Brussels between 1911 and 1914. This significant undertaking represented Delville’s sole official State commission. The entire work was destroyed during World War II when, in September 1944, German occupying forces ignited the dome of the *Palais de Justice*, with the fire spreading to the *Cour d’Assises* housing the paintings.³⁷ The largest, central panel of this cycle, *La Justice idéale, ou la Justice, la Loi et la Pitié*, measured, according to Delville, more than 11 metres wide by 4.5 metres high (**Fig. 10**, visible to the left in the photograph). The four accompanying panels each measured 4 metres by 3 metres.³⁸

³⁶ Delville, *La Mission de L’Art*, 105–107, emphasis in original.

³⁷ A detailed description of this event, including the loss of Delville’s masterwork, was reported in *Le Peuple* of that year: Anon., ‘Au Palais de Justice. L’Incendie était prémédité’, *Le Peuple* (2 September 1944), 2.

³⁸ See Delville, *Autobiographie*, 10. See also Miriam Delville, ‘Jean Delville, mon grand-père’, in *Jean Delville (1867–1953): Maître de l’idéal*, ed. Denis Laoureux (Paris: Somogy éditions d’art, 2014), 26.

Delville's monumental allegorical work, *Les Forces* (1924, **Fig. 11**), another major work completed after the Great War and housed in the *Palais de Justice* in Brussels, measures 8 meters wide by 5 meters high.

Delville consistently produced these large-scale works throughout his career, intending them to embody his Idealist philosophy of art—particularly through what he termed '*Le Principe Social de l'Art*'—to serve a socially transformative purpose. Delville regarded art as a crucial social force, grounded in harmony and Beauty, essential for the moral and intellectual formation of individuals and societies. Quoting Pericles in a seminal passage in his essay, *Le Principe Social de l'Art*, Delville emphasised that art, like music, underpins the state's stability, reflecting the universal principle of harmony and Beauty that governs both the world at large and human societies. For Delville this approach, moreover, fosters a moral and intellectual order through harmony within civilisations and its citizens, thereby affirming harmony's divine role in the world's creation. Delville wrote:

... one day in Athens, the great legislator Pericles proclaimed this wise and profound statement, which seems a living echo of the Pythagorean doctrine: *Do not touch the foundations of Music, for you would touch the very foundations of the State*. In speaking thus, Pericles was formulating the social principle of Art, whose essence is Harmony, that is to say, Beauty. The statesman and the artist within him thus reminded Greece that one of the primary elements of the moral and intellectual harmony of a civilization is the sense of the Beautiful, or, for greater clarity, the direct action of this marvellous sentiment on souls in the formation of human societies. Order and harmony, no one could deny without being unreasonable, are preeminent social virtues. The universe exists only through harmony, and the lofty formula, *ordo ab chao* (order from chaos), is one of the most formidable affirmations of the divinity of Harmony in the primordial genesis of the world.³⁹

Delville asserted that the public is receptive to great works of genius due to their unspoiled response to works of art, responding instinctively to Beauty without requiring analytical understanding. This collective intuition is illuminated by a collectively shared 'inner light of intuition', akin to genius, which results in a profound connection between the public and artistic works of genius that channel the divine sense of Beauty. This bond is the essence of art's social function and connects the soul of the artist to that of the public:

The crowd, whatever one may say, is sensitive to great things because the crowd has a pure and vital emotion. It is enough to show them beautiful and sublime things that affect them without analytical understanding. It is evident that there exists a popular 'instinct', but I am far more certain that this anonymous power, as it is called, is not an entirely obscure and blind force, and that the soul of crowds is illuminated by the inner light of intuition. What a mysterious and profound faculty, indeed, is this immense intuition of peoples! What a strange analogy it has with genius! Crowds understand genius, and genius understands crowds. There exist powerful affinities between this collective consciousness and this individual consciousness. The bond that connects the soul of

³⁹ Delville, 'Le Principe Social de l'Art', *La Belgique Artistique & Littéraire* 7:19 (1907), 31.

geniuses to the soul of peoples is the divine sentiment of the Beautiful; it is Art in its social manifestation.⁴⁰

Delville's aesthetic is grounded in the principle that art must express Ideas underpinning spiritual Beauty, thereby elevating the viewer, and refining their sensibility and moral framework. For Delville, public art is the most effective means to achieve this goal and thus serves a noble purpose. He expressed this core mission statement in a succinct passage in his essay: '... truly, the mission of all the arts lies in bringing ideas to life. Public art, then, captures one of the most harmonious aspects of existence, because building and beautifying human cities gives people a grand opportunity to unleash, in visible splendour and harmony, the core ideas that guide the divine creation and construction of worlds'.⁴¹

It follows, therefore, for Delville that the artist bears a significant social responsibility to create art that edifies individuals and fosters harmony within society. Taking aim at the naturalist and Realist trends of his era, he maintained that artists are tasked with uplifting society by pursuing Ideal Beauty, avoiding trivial or sensual subjects, and producing works that enlighten the collective spirit and strengthens the moral foundation of society. In other words, Delville contended that Beauty is integral to social life, asserting that the pursuit of societal happiness naturally cultivates the flourishing of art, which is absent in disordered or uncultivated societies. Thus, for Delville, both statesmen and artists bear considerable responsibility: public authorities must promote elevated artistic expression to nurture the spirit, while artists must eschew trivial representations to fulfil their ideal and social obligations. Failure in either undermines the vital force of art:

Beauty is inseparable from social life. The pursuit of social happiness naturally brings with it a blossoming of beauty. It is well known that unhappy and unrefined peoples have no art. Social harmony is not complete—frankly, it is not even possible—without the expression of art, which is the very flower and joy of the world. Why is this? Because beauty is deeply tied to goodness, because beauty is the visible form of universal love. The social world and the moral world are one and the same. Art is part of both. This places a tremendous responsibility on the shoulders of the statesman, the sociologist, and the artist alike. On one hand, when public authorities fail to encourage the highest expressions of art, they undermine one of the vital forces of the human spirit. On the other hand, when artists indulge in shallow or trivial depictions, they weaken art itself and fall short of their ideal and social duty.⁴²

Delville's intention for *L'Homme-Dieu* to be displayed in a prominent public building with 'a highly social purpose' reflects his conviction, as elaborated earlier, that this work should fulfil an edifying social role, embodying Ideal Beauty to uplift and inspire viewers morally and spiritually. Delville sought to express his concept of transcendent Beauty primarily through the human form. He believed that the *nude*, articulated in the Classical sense, served as the ideal vehicle for conveying *spiritual Beauty* in artistic form.⁴³ This approach is evident across his

⁴⁰ Delville, 'Le Principe Social de L'Art', 44.

⁴¹ Delville, 'Le Principe Social de L'Art', 45.

⁴² Delville, 'Le Principe Social de L'Art', 34–35.

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the influence of Classical aesthetics in Delville's art, see Cole,

œuvre, particularly in works created for permanent public display. It is as apparent in *L'Homme-Dieu*, with its spiralling, contorted mass of nude figures, as it is in *Prométhée*, which features a centrally placed, physically powerful nude figure in the foreground. Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes*, one of his masterworks, exemplifies his ability to articulate the exquisite beauty of the human figure, cogently expressing the transcendent narrative of that work, as will be explored in greater detail later. As noted previously, the life-sized figures in *L'Homme-Dieu* provoked a negative reaction in conservative circles when the painting was first exhibited. Nevertheless, a detailed examination of the conceptual narrative of this work, expressed through the nude, will now prove instructive in understanding Delville's overarching vision for *L'Homme-Dieu*.

***L'Homme-Dieu* and the Spiritual Evolution of Man**

In *L'Homme-Dieu*, the vibrant ascending Christ figure, with arms outstretched, is positioned centrally above, and distinct from, a disordered darker mass of humanity below, while radiating ethereal beams of light upon them. In this vertically structured composition, the suffering mass of humanity arranged below swirls and ascends—as if in a pyramidal spiralling torrent—*spiritually evolving* towards the Christ figure, or *Man-God*, who draws them upwards with open, outstretched arms. The figures are situated in a cosmic, otherworldly setting, enveloped by voluminous clouds and undulating pale orange bands—or currents—of light or energy.

In direct contrast to the serene elevated figure above, Delville assembled a tumultuous darker asymmetrical mass of humanity in two distinct groups, which are rendered in desaturated sombre tones and organised in a dense crowded space below.

The first group consists of entangled nude figures in a compressed, confined foreground space, mostly rendered in muted greyish-blue tones. These figures, defined in dramatic *chiaroscuro* that emphasises their lumpy material form, appear fused, with some in anguished, contorted postures, forming an undifferentiated and non-individuated mass, merged in an unredeemed state of sorrow and suffering. They embody the full spectrum of the human condition, encompassing infancy to old age, hope, love, and despair. Most figures appear asleep or unconscious, typically with closed eyes, and those below remain in recumbent postures (**Fig. 12**). At the composition's base, Delville depicted a reclining woman with a near-newborn infant, seemingly neglected, between her thighs, beside another voluptuous female figure posed in a contracted position facing in the opposite direction. The newborn infant's placement in the composition clearly establishes a dialectical and symbolic relationship with the Christ figure, symbolising the uncorrupted innocence of humanity's primal state at the outset of its evolutionary journey towards the spiritually enlightened, or *evolved*, state of Christhood embodied by the Man-God above.

Diagonally above and to the left of the mother and newborn, a woman clasps two young boys, one arching upwards with his head thrown back. Beside this boy, two elderly men reach outwards and upwards above a female figure lying on her back, seemingly merging with the swirling currents of energy around her. To the right of the mother and sons, an emaciated elderly man arches backwards, arms raised above his head, his right hand gently touching another infant's head (**Fig. 13**). To his right, another young child and a cluster of male and female figures are visible. At the far right of this lower group, a young man and woman are depicted in an affectionate embrace, surrounded by figures rising towards the Christ figure above (**Fig. 14**). The lower figures are rendered in cool tones of green, blue, and grey.

The second group consists of a compact ensemble of upright figures in the upper central portion of the composition, rendered in warmer and darker greyish-green hues, with most extending their arms diagonally upwards, in gestures of supplication, to form a rhythmic criss-crossing pattern converging towards the Christ figure's feet (**Fig. 15**). Surrounding this central group, the features of men and women are faintly discernible, seemingly dematerialised in the intense, warm pale pinkish-orange light emanating from the Christ figure, some with open eyes as they become aware of the redemptive figure above. The upright figures appear more distinct, increasingly awakened, and individualised as they reach upwards with outstretched arms, merging into the ethereal light as they *spiritually evolve*, drawing closer to the Christ figure. Viewed from bottom to top, the figures encapsulate the complete cycle of physical birth and spiritual rebirth.

Delville explored the concept of spiritual evolution extensively, not only in *Dialogue entre Nous* but also in greater depth in two later Theosophical works: *Le Mystère de l'Évolution ou de la Généalogie de l'Homme* (1905); and the serialised essay 'Evolutionnisme et Occultisme' in *La Belgique Artistique et Littéraire* (1908). Delville consistently underscored the esoteric belief in humanity's innate divinity, suggesting that the soul originates from the Divine at birth and returns to it after death: 'Man emanates from God and returns to God. On earth, Man is but halfway along his evolutionary destiny, and though he may be conscious—if he is initiated—of being himself a living embodiment of the great universal laws ...'.⁴⁴ For Delville, there exists an analogic connection between man (microcosm) and the universe (macrocosm): 'Man is a universe in miniature, and the Universe is a man on a grand scale ... their constitution is *analogous*'.⁴⁵ Delville argued that humanity has a spiritual destiny to fulfil, viewing it as limiting to consider humans solely as creatures of the natural world, driven by instinct and passions, rather than as beings participating in both the macrocosm, the Ideal or spiritual realm, and the microcosm, the inner world:

Those who limit themselves to defining man in his relation to visible nature, without defining nature in its relation to the invisible, are destined to perpetually deceive themselves and will never comprehend that all the forces of nature are proportional to the balancing action of its Trinitarian Unity. Nor will they understand that the being, immortal through the phases of its metamorphoses, lives eternally in the higher and lower worlds, according to the angelic or human state of its attractions.⁴⁶

The soul's evolution in individuals mirrors the evolution of forms and matter in the universe, progressing through three natural dimensions or realms: 'The three worlds ... are the three states of regeneration: Natural, Spiritual, and Divine, through which the soul undergoes evolution and involution. These three worlds, the Divine World, the Astral World, and the Elemental World, are each subdivided into three planes, hierarchical regions of the involution and evolution of beings'.⁴⁷ Delville's ontology aligns with his cosmology, positing that humanity evolves through a hierarchy from the sensory, through the emotional, to the spiritual, corresponding to the triadic

⁴⁴ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous: Argumentation Kabbalistique, Occultiste, Idéaliste*, Bruges: Daveluy Frères, 1895, 70.

⁴⁵ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 65, emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 25.

⁴⁷ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 25.

constitution of body, soul, and spirit: ‘Man began life with a sensation; feelings activated his evolution, and ideas formed the final process of his fulfilment’.⁴⁸ This is also reflected in the evolution of the individual; the child is ‘sensational’, the youth ‘sentimental’, the adult ‘intellectual’; as well as in the collective development of society: ‘Every social collective is composed, first, of *instinctives*—the common people; second, of *animics*—the bourgeoisie; and third, of *cerebrals*—the intellectuals’.⁴⁹ This notion of a threefold hierarchical evolution pervades all of Delville’s thinking. Most importantly, Delville consistently stressed in his writings that life’s purpose is to aspire towards the spiritual, the ideal, embodying balance, harmony, and unity. For Delville, the ‘Ideal’ represents the highest aspiration of life, embodying the metaphysical realm beyond physical reality:

The Ideal is the complement of life, the complement of reality, the *raison d’être* of matter, and the nourishment of thought; it is thus the eternal, necessary aspiration toward the unattainable. It is, like every principle of Beauty, the realization of the possible within the impossible. The Ideal is the highest degree of intelligence to which the intellectualised human aspires; it is the intuitive and reasoned attraction to the divine, the perfect, and the absolute. The Ideal is that luminous tendency toward all that is truth and infinite. As the conscious force of our normal destiny, we are, despite ourselves, compelled to strive toward the Ideal, and it is through the spirit alone that its revelation comes to us.⁵⁰

Furthermore, the human soul, emanating from the divine, pursues a continuous process of spiritual evolution to reunite with its divine origin, as Delville asserted: ‘The eternal laws decree that Man emanates from God and returns to God. On earth, Man is but halfway along his evolutionary destiny’.⁵¹ Thus human existence represents a universal force embodied in organic form, perpetually transforming through an ascending or descending transformation. Delville’s views on the soul’s evolution are linked to the threefold nature of humanity, comprising instinct, intelligence, and spirit—as well as the threefold structure of the universe, encompassing the natural, astral, and divine realms. Delville wrote that: ‘It is by successively and alternately passing through these three planes of Creation that the immortal Spirit—Man—follows the *involution* and *evolution* laws of Reincarnation, which encompass the issue of the hierarchy of beings’.⁵² Later, in his work *Le Mystère de L’Evolution*, he articulated a belief that humanity evolves through successive orders—from the mineral to the divine: ‘Theosophy teaches that these vast masses of human monads or consciousnesses successively and periodically undergo the process of evolution, passing through all the lower degrees of consciousness: from the mineral kingdom to the vegetable kingdom, from the vegetable kingdom to the animal kingdom, from the animal kingdom to the human kingdom, and also from the human kingdom to the spiritual kingdom, and from the spiritual kingdom to the divine kingdom’.⁵³

⁴⁸ Jean Delville, ‘La Fin du Réalisme et le Renaissance Idéaliste (III)’, *La Ligue Artistique*, 24 (December 1895), 1.

⁴⁹ Delville, ‘La Fin du Réalisme’, *ibid*, emphasis added.

⁵⁰ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 60–61.

⁵¹ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 70.

⁵² Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 28, emphasis added.

⁵³ Jean Delville, *Le Mystère de l’Evolution*, 32.

For Theosophists, humanity is fundamentally spiritual: individual souls form part of the Divine or the *Great Soul* of the cosmos; or as Édouard Schuré put it, we are: ‘A spark of the divine spirit, an immortal monad’.⁵⁴ The soul, or *Psyche*, descends into matter at birth and returns to the spiritual realm after death in a continuous cycle of *incarnation* (or *involution*) and *excarnation* (or *evolution*) after death.

In essence, the human soul is immortal, destined to transcend the limitations of corporeal existence and evolve towards pure spirit. Ultimately, life’s goal is to achieve equilibrium through the union of opposites (personified in the duality between matter and spirit), through the involution of spirit into matter and the evolution of matter into spirit. Schuré gave a concise summary of the principles of the esoteric doctrine, which is common to almost all the writings during the period:

The spirit is the sole reality. Matter is but its inferior, mutable, and ephemeral expression, its dynamism within space and time.—Creation is eternal and continuous, like life itself.—The microcosm of man, by his triune constitution (spirit, soul, and body), is the image and mirror of the macrocosm-universe (divine, human, and natural worlds), which is itself the organ of the ineffable God, the Absolute Spirit, whose nature is Father, Mother, and Son (essence, substance, and life).—This is why man, as the image of God, can become His living Word. The gnosis or rational mysticism of all ages is the art of finding God within oneself by developing the hidden depths and latent faculties of consciousness.—The human soul, the individual essence, is immortal by its very nature. Its development occurs on a plane that is alternately descending and ascending, through existences that are by turns spiritual and corporeal.—Reincarnation is the law of its evolution. Once it attains perfection, it transcends this law and returns to the Pure Spirit, to God, in the fullness of its consciousness.⁵⁵

Delville invoked this notion of the evolution of the soul towards Divinity in his poem *Incantation Intérieur*, first published in 1900. The poem celebrates the soul’s divine and immortal essence and its vivifying connection to the eternal universal spirit, emphasising the soul’s spiritual awakening and transcendence beyond material existence. It portrays the soul as immortal, reflecting divine beauty against the backdrop of the ‘beastly’ life of physical limitations. Through imagery of radiant light, Love, and grace, the poem articulates experiences of regeneration, rebirth, and the ascension toward unity with the Divine:

Incantation Intérieur

Salut a toi, salut, essence de mon être,
je sens en moi le dieu d'éternité
renaitre!
Par toi je suis esprit et je suis
immortel,
et je me sens vivant a travers l'éternel.
Dans le sang de la chair, quand

Interior Incantation

Hail to you, hail, essence of my being,
I feel within me the god of eternity reborn!
Through y Schuré ou, I am spirit, I am
immortal,
And I feel alive through the eternal.

⁵⁴ Édouard Schuré, *Les grands initiés, esquisse de l'histoire secrète des religions* (1889), 3rd ed. (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1895), 346.

⁵⁵ Schuré, *Les grands Initiés*, xx.

sommeille la bête,
 l'angélique beauté de l'âme se reflète
 comme un ciel sidéral en un cloaque
 obscur.
 Mon âme est à la fois passe, présent,
 futur.
 Tout est en l'âme, l'âme est en tout,
 car en elle,
 passe le grand frisson de l'âme
 universelle.
 Au-dessus de la vie, au-delà du trépas,
 dans le rayonnement ou l'ombre ne
 vient pas,
 on se reconnaît mieux en face de soi-
 même,
 avec ce que l'on croit, avec ce que
 l'on aime.
 Je me sens un visage ébloui de beauté
 fait de l'auguste oubli de ce que
 j'eusse été,
 si j'avais effacé, d'une main lourde et
 noire,
 les divines splendeurs qui sont dans
 ma mémoire.
 Tout au fond de moi-même s'ouvre un
 autre univers;
 j'entends son souffle pur palpiter à
 travers
 l'harmonieux accord du murmure des
 anges
 pénétrant de leur vol les astres et les
 fanges
 et faisant, pleins d'Amour, de Paix et
 de Bonheur,
 tous leur rythmes divins s'accorder
 dans mon cœur.
 O joie! O grâce! O toi, Voix qui
 chante et qui pense l
 O Verbe dont les mots sont faits du
 grand silence
 ou l'homme intérieur en tend l'écho
 sacre,
 je renaïs, je revis, je suis régénère
 dans l'influx immanent de ta force
 idéale!
 C'est l'heure, l'heure en moi, lucide et

In the blood of the flesh, where the beast lies
 dormant,
 The angelic beauty of the soul reflects
 Like a starry sky in a dark abyss.

 My soul is at once past, present, future.

 All is in the soul, the soul is in all, for within it

 Passes the great thrill of the universal soul.

 Above life, beyond death,
 In the radiance where shadow never falls,

 We know ourselves better, face to face with our
 essence,
 With what we believe, with what we love.

 I feel a face radiant with beauty,
 Formed from the august forgetting of what I
 might have been,
 Had I erased, with a heavy and dark hand,

 The divine splendours held in my memory.

 Deep within me, another universe unfolds;

 I hear its pure breath pulsing through

 The harmonious accord of the angels' murmur,

 Their flight piercing stars and mire alike,

 And, filled with Love, Peace, and Bliss,

 Their divine rhythms unite within my heart.

 O joy! O grace! O you, Voice that sings and
 thinks!
 O Word whose words are woven from the great
 silence,
 Where the inner man hears the sacred echo,

 I am reborn, I live again, I am regenerated
 In the immanent flow of your ideal force!

aurorale,
 L'heure claire qui sonne en ce destin
 béni,
 où je me vois, selon la loi de l'infini,
 monter l'escalier d'or de la pure
 lumière
 sur l'effluve de feu d'une ardente
 prière,
 tel un fluide élément par lui-même
 aimante,
 atôme qui se perd dans la Divinité.⁵⁶

It is the hour, the lucid and dawn-like hour in
 me,
 The clear hour that rings in this blessed destiny,

 Where I see myself, by the law of the infinite,
 Ascending the golden staircase of pure light,

 On the fiery current of an ardent prayer,

 Like a fluid element drawn to itself,

 An atom lost in Divinity.

However, the soul's evolution is not solely an individual achievement but is also the collective goal of humanity. In *L'Homme-Dieu*, Delville evidently articulated the rising mass of humanity evolving towards the Christ figure as a shared experience, a collective ascension from the lowest to the highest state of being. This collective evolution was stated as a teleological purpose of humanity as a whole by Annie Besant: 'The Ascension for humanity is when the whole race has attained the Christ condition ... That is the goal, prefigured in the triumph of the Initiate, but reached only when the human race is perfected, and when 'the great orphan Humanity' is no longer an orphan, but consciously recognises itself as the Son of God'.⁵⁷

Similarly, Delville concluded his lengthy essay *Le Mystère de l'Évolution ou de la Généalogie de L'Homme* with an evocative passage (worth quoting in full) describing this inexorable cycle through which humanity evolves towards an eternal and Divine Truth. This passage serves as one of Delville's most evocative commentaries on the turbulent, evolving mass of souls in his *L'Homme-Dieu*:

Only then does it appear, in the immense unfolding of its evolving mental activities, this powerful Wave of human lives, this vast oceanic unity of souls, which surges from age to age, from planet to planet, from continent to continent, from race to race, from civilization to civilization, this same Humanity of today which, in immemorial times, traversed all the experiences of invisible and visible life, slowly, arduously, but inevitably developing, with each reincarnation, another facet of personality, a new faculty, a new sentiment, a new morality, a new power, a different intellectual conception, advancing through the centuries, from progress to progress, through all alternations of shadow and light, ignorance and knowledge, belief and doubt, joy and pain, watering the world with its sweat and blood, through births and deaths, ever and always ascending toward the Goal of Evolution, which is Perfection, Wisdom, Knowledge, this Humanity still and forever marching as it marched in the Past, as it marches in the Present, as it will march

⁵⁶ Jean Delville, 'Incantation Intérieure', *La Lumière* 9 (11 February 1900), 1. The poem was republished in Delville's anthology, *Les Splendeurs Méconnue* (Brussels: Oscar Lamberty, 1922), 141–142.

⁵⁷ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 250.

in the Future, One, Indivisible, and Immortal, in pursuit of the Eternal and Divine Truth from which it emanates!⁵⁸

Resonances of these ideas regarding spiritualised future humanity are evident in a poem by Delville titled *Race Futur*. The poem envisions a future humanity transformed beyond death into a divine essence, destined to become a race reborn as divine sowers of new ideas, who will embody love, fraternity, and incarnate the Christ within. The poem was first published in September 1899; around the time he first met Besant and the beginnings of his path towards esoteric Theosophy.

Race Futur

Vous qui devez venir, qui reviendrez
au monde
et qui serez un jour la sainte
humanité,
vous les vivants nouveaux après avoir
été
ceux que la mort plongea dans
l'essence profonde,

vous tous qui renaîtrez par l'ordre et
la beauté
pour vouloir que l'Esprit immortel
vous féconde,
et pour que, simplement, se prépare et
se fonde
un règne fait d'Amour et de
Fraternité,

ô vous, semeurs divins des idées
nouvelles,
dans l'auguste avenir, l'aube des
temps meilleurs
attend vos corps plus beaux et vos
âmes plus belles,

et le Christ rayonnant brillera dans
vos cœurs,
comme un soleil parmi la rosée dans
l'herbe,
—et vous serez la chair et le sang de
son Verbe!⁵⁹

Future Race

You who must come, who shall return to the
world
and who one day shall be the holy humanity,
you, the new living, after having been
those whom death plunged into the profound
essence,

you all who shall be reborn through order and
beauty
to desire that the immortal Spirit may quicken
you,
and that, simply, there may be prepared and
founded
a reign made of Love and Fraternity,

O you, divine sowers of new ideas,
in the august future, the dawn of better times
awaits your fairer forms and your more beautiful
souls,

and the radiant Christ shall shine within your
hearts,
like a sun amidst the dew upon the grass,
—and you shall be the flesh and blood of His

⁵⁸ Jean Delville, *Le Mystère de l'Évolution*, 79–80.

⁵⁹ Jean Delville, 'Race Futur', *Le Thyrses*, 1:9 (1 September 1899), 68. The poem was republished in Delville's anthology *Les Splendeurs Méconnues*, 155–156.

Word!

A notable feature of Delville's figures in *L'Homme-Dieu* is their depiction entirely in the nude. This feature (already emphasised earlier) of many of his monumental works serves a fundamental expressive purpose in terms of his overall Idealist aesthetic and the expression of transcendent Beauty, which was the basis of his *L'Art Social*. To gain a deeper understanding of this work, and others like it in his *œuvre*, it is necessary to examine this aspect of his art in more detail in order to gain a complete understanding of his purpose underlying his monumental public works of art.

The Significance of the Nude in Delville's Art

The arrangement of somnolent nude figures, fused into a vast amorphous mass in Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu*, constitutes a significant trope in his art. The earliest iteration of this theme is seen in the tightly knit mass of figures swirling in the void of his *Le Cycle passionelle* (1895, destroyed, **Fig. 16**). This work is based on Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*, the second circle of the Lustful, where the damned souls of the lustful are borne upon a dark and howling wind. This scene of a mass of naked figures succumbing to their passions and senses is repeated in his important painting *Les Trésors de Sathan* ([sic], 1895, **Fig. 17**).⁶⁰ In this work the sensual figures are forever trapped in the eternal thrall of Sathan's lure. They are submerged in a sub-aquatic setting, drawn towards Satan as his 'treasure'; they are literally drowning in their sensual sleep of erotic pleasure, as well as their enslavement to materialism in the form of scattered money and gold. Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu* is starkly articulated as an opposing counterpoint to this earlier work, where the figures are drawn upwards towards the redeeming figure of the Cosmic Christ, through whom they are liberated from their mortal material instincts and limitations as well as the cycles of life, birth, death, love, and despair, i.e., all the suffering of humanity. The *Christ-Man* liberates humanity from these snares and traps and thus opposes the earlier figure Sathan, who keeps them enslaved. Seen together, this work emphasises spiritual liberation as opposed to materialistic incarceration; and it points in the optimistic direction of spiritual rebirth and redemption as opposed to the entrapment of materialism and instinctual desire. The theme of a crowd of unclothed human figures experiencing a transfigurative metamorphosis is most notably evident in Delville's companion painting to *L'Homme-Dieu* completed a few years later, namely *Prométhée* (1907), which includes the motif of a seemingly endless mass of naked figures with outstretched arms reaching upwards towards the gigantic light-bearer striding across the celestial world entirely nude. This motif of a mass of naked figures is also evident in two important later works, *La Roue du monde* (1940, **Fig. 18**) and *L'Ascension Humaine* (1942, **Fig. 19**).

The overt nudity of the figures in Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu* was a reason, he stated, for it being rejected by the Catholic community. As we have seen, this meant that the work subsequently never found a place in a Church setting as he had hoped. But Delville attached great importance to the representation of the nude. The notion that the Ideal, the source of spiritual beauty, can be expressed through the nude human form is central to his writings and art.⁶¹ Delville subscribed to the esoteric notion of man's essential divinity, that is, to the idea that man originates in the divine and contains within him a blueprint of the transcendental, which implies that an analogic connection, a correspondence, exists between man, *microcosm*, and the

⁶⁰ For a detailed analysis of this work, see Cole *Jean Delville*, 215–244.

⁶¹ The following discussion is adapted from Cole, *Jean Delville*, 300ff.

universe, *macrocosm*. An extension of this idea is Delville's assertion that the human body reflects the hidden world, the domain of esoteric thought: 'The human body is a summary of the physical and occult laws of the world: everything therein has been ordained in combinations of an incommensurably mysterious logic to accomplish, through regular and uniform means, movement and life'.⁶² The emphasis on the human body and the occult nature of man is particularly significant in terms of Delville's aesthetic, which places great importance on the human body as a subject through which the divine can be realised in plastic form. Therefore, in Delville's work, the human form, the nude, is the quintessence of spiritual expression.⁶³ Delville placed special emphasis on the importance of the nude as the expression of universal truths, not only about mankind but about all that is beautiful in the life of the spirit. He saw the beauty of the human form as the vehicle for the expression of universal beauty, of the beauty of the Idea and of the Absolute. The beauty of the human form serves as the paramount symbol in Delville's art. Beauty serves to bring together the physical and the spiritual, the human and the transcendental, symbolising a union between Nature and the Absolute. He writes:

The nude possesses the lofty quality of being synthetic and universal ... In evoking Man, it evokes Humanity and all the beauty of Life—not that life as we, moderns, understand it, marked by nervous agitation, fevers, and morbid effervescence, but the great universal Life, that which fecundates the spirit and the earth, makes the stars and souls resplendent, and sets the expanse of space vibrating; that which pulsates in substance as in essence, which governs and moves the universe, beings, and things, mortal or immortal, in the infinite rhythm and mystery of Eternity—a divine macrocosm and human microcosm where Universal Beauty, composed of Love, Wisdom, and Light, forever shines and is reflected.⁶⁴

The beauty of the nude for Delville is the analogous embodiment of the beauty of the Idea, and it is the artist's primary task to recognise that: 'This beauty that he seeks in bodies, in forms, is the same as that which manifests in feelings and ideas, and his duty as an artist will be to make it spring forth in its greatest possible purity'.⁶⁵ This, of course, is a fundamental notion in Classical aesthetics which sees the Divine order in the human form through mathematical proportion. The nude is therefore the *sine qua non* of Delville's Idealist aesthetic; he wrote that: 'The nude is the alpha and omega of aesthetics. All the artist's knowledge is encapsulated within it. It can express the most subtle and the most powerful movements of the soul'.⁶⁶ Consequently, it is unsurprising that Delville extolled the virtues of Classical Greek art and Renaissance

⁶² Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 68.

⁶³ These ideas are reflected from the French occultist Joséphin Péladan with whom Delville was closely associated. For example, Péladan wrote: 'The human body is the principal, and ought to be the sole, subject to which drawing should be applied. Man, or the microcosm, embodies the synthesis of the universe, or macrocosm; he is the pinnacle of the sensible world. It seems, according to the text of Genesis, that the entire animal creation was no more than an ascending scale leading to man'. Péladan, *L'Art Idéaliste et Mystique*, précédé de la Réfutation de Taine (Paris: E Sansot et Cie, 1894, repr. 1909), 167–168.

⁶⁴ Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 62–63.

⁶⁵ Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 63.

⁶⁶ Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 60, Emphasis in original.

painters, especially Phidias, Botticelli, Leonardo, and especially Michelangelo, as perfect realisations of the beautiful naked human form embodying the spiritual Ideal.⁶⁷ In his *La Mission de l'Art* he wrote: 'It is only with Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo, that is to say, with the new cult of form, that the *nude* reappears in its profound plastic and spiritual significance, and that the Renaissance unfolds in all its idealistic glory ...'.⁶⁸ In his third *Lettre d'Italie*, for instance—published in *La Ligue Artistique* during his *Prix de Rome* trip to Italy—he noted the connection between the nude and the dynamics of the soul, particularly in the work of Michelangelo: 'Michelangelo demonstrated that the nude is capable of expressing all the most inner, most secret movements of the soul'.⁶⁹ Elsewhere, Delville asserted the moral facet expressed through the nude: 'The nude, alone, places us before the enigma of life. The true nude, in a work of art, is also a lesson in high morality ... The nude will nonetheless remain one of the purest means of Beauty, and great artists will no less understand its ideal and positive value'.⁷⁰ Moreover, he stressed that the nude is the personification of the essential ideas that govern art and life: 'It is through the nude, alone, that the artist can express the essential character of life, impersonal ideas, universal beliefs, and the general sentiments of humanity. I like to reiterate, the nude reveals the true meaning of nature'.⁷¹

In his *La Mission de l'Art*, Delville outlined what could be his credo of his Idealist aesthetic, namely, the importance of the nude as a means by which to convey this spiritual reality of the metaphysical Ideal that lies behind the sensual world. Here he emphasised the nude as the cornerstone of artistic aesthetics, encapsulating the artist's skill and ability to convey profound emotions. Moreover, for Delville, the nude is a universal symbol that expresses the unity of all beings, evoking the essence of life and divine beauty, characterised by love, wisdom, and light. The idea that the nude is a vehicle for social harmony and unity pivots back to his ideas that lie at the heart of his social principle in art (*L'Art social*). He emphasised, moreover, that artists' mission is to reveal this eternal beauty through their work, transcending imperfections, and societal constraints and noting that those who fail to recognise this divine inspiration produce inferior art. A key passage in his writing explains:

... And this Beauty, when the artist becomes aware of it, when it appears to him in its unfading and divine splendour, he will understand his mission. He will finally comprehend that this beauty he seeks in bodies, in forms, is the same as that which manifests in feelings and ideas, and that his duty as an artist will be to make it spring forth in its greatest possible purity, as a spark leaps from the dark stone, through the lower and material realities where it lies imprisoned ... For the artist who is not conscious of a divine force fecundating his human force in Beauty, and who, in the depths of his being, does not feel the God of Love and Harmony palpitating under whose breath worlds and humanities revolve, that artist will not be worthy of a civilization. His works will be abortions. His talent, if he possesses any, will be a wasted force.⁷²

⁶⁷ See Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 55, 61.

⁶⁸ Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 61–62, Emphasis in original.

⁶⁹ Delville, 'Lettre d'Italie Antiques à Rome', *La Ligue Artistique* 2 (17 January 1897), 2.

⁷⁰ Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 58.

⁷¹ Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 59, emphasis in original.

⁷² Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 61–64, emphasis in original. For a further discussion of the importance of the nude in Delville's art, see Cole, *Jean Delville*, 300–302. Delville maintained

Given that Delville's concept of the nude lies at the heart of his artistic practice and theoretical framework, one can appreciate the extent to which these ideas are embedded in the three works that he produced at the turn of the century. *L'Amour des Âmes*, *L'Homme-Dieu*, and *Prométhée* are paradigmatic works that represent Delville's theory of art expressed through the nude. But in conveying symbolic messages related to the ideals of the Theosophical movement they also encapsulate the idea that their form recapitulates their content; in other words, their respective narratives are inextricably linked to the visual tropes, through the highly articulate deployment of the nude. The nude is the incarnation of Ideal, or spiritual, Beauty, which is used to express their intended message. Moreover, one can readily discern, from the discussion of Delville's ideas so far, how his *Social Principle of Art* and his Idealist interpretation of spiritual Beauty converge. For Delville, works of art that are intended for public spaces serve as a catalyst (or a *portal* between the physical and the transcendental) inspiring spiritual and moral upliftment in society. This is the case both in terms of the form of the work of art (as expressions of Ideal, or spiritual Beauty) and its content (narratives conveying spiritually uplifting messages). Whether these works had the intended effect or not is perhaps one of the key issues of debate regarding the Symbolist movement generally, and of Delville's art in particular.

The Image of Christ in *L'Homme-Dieu*: The Initiatory Path to the Divine

The image of Christ recurs frequently in Delville's work from early on in his career, appearing in both his poetry and writings and his paintings. Notable examples in his art include: *Le Christ glorifié par les enfants* (1894), as well as in the central figure of Plato in his *École de Platon* (1898, surrounded by twelve followers—hinting at Schuré's idea of Plato and Christ as one of the 'Great Initiates' respectively), and, furthermore, *La Justice chrétienne* from his monumental series *La Justice a traverse les Ages* (1911–1914). Further important examples include the Christ figure in his *Les Forces* (1924, **Fig. 11**) and *L'Ascension Humaine* (c.1942), and the study for the latter, *Le Porteur de la Lumière* (n.d., **Fig. 20**). Of his later works, the last two listed here are closest in terms of their form and content to Delville's earlier *L'Homme-Dieu*.

Delville's Christ figure in *L'Homme-Dieu* is not wholly conceived within a conventional Christian framework but is instead refracted, as will be discussed later, through his burgeoning interest in Theosophy, which viewed Christ in esoteric terms. Nevertheless, the painting does, at first glance, reflect the Christian concept of salvation from suffering through the gift of redemption via Christ's spiritual illumination. In conventional terms, it also embodies an eschatological narrative concerning the ultimate spiritual renewal or rebirth of humanity's intrinsic divine potential.

The Christ figure in *L'Homme-Dieu* is clothed in a diaphanous, transparent tunic with a brilliant cloak draped over his outstretched arms. This transcendent figure is surrounded by an

his position regarding the human form as a vehicle of Beauty throughout his career. In a later essay he wrote: 'In great works of art one sees, one feels, that all the artist's skill, all his inspiration, has been concentrated on creating forms of beauty. The human form has remained sacred to painters and sculptors. It is through it that they have achieved their finest works. And so it has been from ancient times to the modern age'. *Bulletin de la classe des Beaux-Arts* 31 (1949), 24. In an essay published in the year of his death, he remained convinced that: 'Art achieves its visual expression through the dignity and beauty of the human form'. *Bulletin de la classe des Beaux-Arts* 35 (1953), 18.

ovoid, luminescent, rainbow-like aureole, rendered in bands of pink, blue, and green and pierced with radiating shards of light that appear to dispel the surrounding tumultuous clouds, revealing a translucent blue celestial background in the distance. The depiction of golden light radiating from the glowing face and powerful body of the Christ figure is striking and will be explored in further detail below. Positioned at the apex of the composition's vertical axis, Delville's Christ figure serves, both visually and symbolically, as a stabilising anchor in contrast to the chaotic mass below. The radiant energy emanating from this figure naturally draws the viewer's eye upwards, away from the sombre mass. This upward movement reinforces the symbolism of ascension central to Delville's painting. This motion is further emphasised through the transition from darkness to light, with warm, soft yellow and orange tones, alongside lighter, gentle blues around the Christ figure, contrasting with the darker, cooler greys used to depict the desolate figures below.

Significantly, Delville's Christ figure occupies approximately one-third of the painting (over life-size) and is considerably larger than the struggling figures of humanity. The contrast between these two realms, the upper transcendent world of the Christ figure and the darker physicality of the material human world below, is further reinforced through the articulation of space. The upper area is an atmospheric, expansive celestial world with an infinitely receding dimension, achieved through aerial perspective with diminishing detail and softened edges. In contrast, the figures below are compressed in a claustrophobic cluster of sombre, entangled forms. Overall, Delville creates a deliberate contrast in his use of colour, light, and space—between the serene, transcendent world of the Christ figure above and the brimming mass of unredeemed humanity below. This contrast, from darkness to light, generates an upward dynamic movement towards the Christ figure, reinforcing the narrative of the evolutionary ascension of humanity's souls through the redeeming figure above.

It is notable that Delville articulated the face and hair of his Christ by resorting to features that are distinctly Oriental or Semitic, rather than the blonde, fair-skinned occidental type found typically in traditional European depictions of Christ.⁷³ This is deliberate and reflects Delville's strong advocacy of a syncretic understanding of the 'secret doctrine' outlined in the Theosophical writings of Besant and Blavatsky, which views the oriental and occidental spiritual traditions, represented by Buddha and Christ respectively, as having an underlying unity. In a polemical passage in his *La Mission de l'Art* Delville wrote in this regard: 'Christ is called *Love* and *Light*. The Spirit of God, the universal Word, shines upon all humanity. And herein lies the disagreement between the secret doctrine and Catholic dogma: Buddha is the Christ of the East, just as Christ is the Buddha of the West'.⁷⁴ Delville would develop this idea further in his extensive Theosophical treatise *Le Christ reviendra* (1913), in the final chapter titled 'Le lien Occulte entre le Bouddha et le Christ', where he outlined, at length, the (occult) relationship between the two spiritual figures noting that: 'Rare are those who understand the nature of the bond that exists between the Eastern Master and the Western Master, between *Buddha-Gautama* and the *Bodhisattva Maitreya-Christ*'.⁷⁵ He explained further, in one lucid passage, that both Christ and Buddha were two manifestations of the same divine 'Truth' representing Love and Wisdom respectively:

⁷³ See Piérard, 'Jean Delville Peintre, Poète, Esthéticien', 220.

⁷⁴ Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 105–106, emphasis in original.

⁷⁵ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 363.

In truth, above the Buddha of the Buddhists, as above the Christ of the Christians, there exists the true Buddha and the true Christ, the ‘Lords of Compassion’, the ‘Saviors of the World’, the ‘Sons of God’ who came to earth to teach the same spiritual Brotherhood of peoples.

As Lord Gautama was the Buddha of Wisdom, Christ is the Buddha of Love. Wisdom and Love are manifestations of the same divine Truth. By delving into the teachings of the Buddha and those of the Christ, one finds in each as much Wisdom and Love as in the other.⁷⁶

The appearance from the Orient of the future Christ is mysteriously invoked in Delville’s poem *L’Attente*. The poem’s message is one of hope, spiritual awakening, and universal transformation. It suggests that humanity is at a turning point, poised to receive divine enlightenment from a messianic figure originating in the East. The poem blends Christian messianic imagery with Eastern mysticism, suggesting a universal spiritual renewal that transcends specific religious boundaries, in its invocation of the ‘Coming of the future Christ’. The poem thus invokes the Theosophical notion of the *Maitreya-Christ*, which will be discussed in more detail below:

L’Attente

C’est bien là l’heure grave et suprême
 où nous sommes.
 Le sais-tu, toi, passant, toi, mon frère
 en douleur,
 ce que savent déjà l’astre d’or et la
 fleur?
 Ecoute aussi passer dans la calme
 nature
 le mystique frisson, le suave murmure
 venant des hauts lointains du monde
 oriental,
 là-bas, dans l’Ile Blanche, l’Ile de
 l’Idéal,
 où, selon la promesse, infaillible et
 sacrée,
 la Venue du Christ futur est préparée.
 Car c’est de ce côté, c’est encore de là,
 du fond mystérieux du grand Himalaya,

The Expectation

We stand indeed at the solemn and
 supreme hour.
 Do you know, O passerby, O my brother
 in sorrow,
 what the golden star and the flower
 already know?
 Listen, too, to the passing in tranquil
 nature
 of the mystic shiver, the gentle murmur,
 coming from the high, distant realms of
 the Eastern world,
 far off, in the White Isle, the Isle of the
 Ideal,
 where, according to the infaillible and
 sacred promise,
 the Coming of the future Christ is being
 prepared.
 For it is from that direction, once again
 from there,
 from the mysterious depths of the great

⁷⁶ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 347. He continued (p. 359): ‘The Buddha and the Christ are Sublime Leaders of the same Occult Hierarchy, the divine Hierophants of the most Sacred Mysteries. Both have taught mankind the same Initiation by showing them the same goal to attain: Liberation in Nirvana, Salvation in Heaven, which are one and the same. The bond that exists between Them is of so occult, so sacred a nature that it is difficult to explain in ordinary terms’.

qu'Il va venir bientôt pour inonder la
terre
avec tout ce qu'Il a de force et de
lumière,
de divine sagesse et de pure beauté,
afin d'en éblouir toute l'humanité.⁷⁷

Himalaya,
that He will soon come to flood the earth
with all His strength and light,

with divine wisdom and pure beauty,
finally, to dazzle all of humanity.

As we will discuss further on, the message that Christ is the bearer of divine wisdom and love, indicated above, is an important notion embedded in Delville's articulation of the Christ figure in his *L'Homme-Dieu*.

The 'exoteric' and 'esoteric' Christ in Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu*

Delville's representation of Christ in *L'Homme-Dieu* can be seen as dual: both *exoteric*, rooted in biblical narratives; and *esoteric*, reflecting Theosophical interpretations of Christ, that is, as a spiritual Avatar, Initiate, and the symbolic manifestation of the *God within us*. Although Delville was original in the way he articulated this aspect of the Christ in his art, one must explore the extent to which his intellectual framework is theoretically indebted to esoteric Theosophy and particularly to the writings of Annie Besant. We have noted that Delville was extensively influenced by Besant, whom he met in August 1899. Thereafter he became a close associate of hers in the Theosophical movement more widely and remained loyal to her ideas until her death in 1933⁷⁸ (Fig. 21). After his first encounter with Besant while attending her lecture titled 'La Sagesse Antique', given at the *Salle Kevers* in Brussels in August 1899, Delville wrote enthusiastically of her, in an article published in *Le Thyrse* in September 1899:

... an authentic emissary bringing to our era of moral and intellectual blindness the word of wisdom and light. For indeed, this venerable woman appears in this painful and shadowy hour as a living and fecundating light, whose radiance penetrates the heart and soul of those who know how to hear, listen, and understand her ... Mrs. Besant addresses the most profound problems of transcendental metaphysics with a clarity and purity of expression that convinces and captivates even the most obstinate sceptics. As a philosopher, she delves into the secret splendours of the moral, intellectual, and spiritual world with the lucidity of the greatest philosophical geniuses. Alongside the speculations of our Western philosophy and positive science, which she thoroughly understands and whose obscure and sterile incoherence she has rejected, she knows the secrets of that vast and mysterious secret doctrine that a few rare adepts are tasked with scattering to the four winds of the spirit ... This great feminine soul, ever oriented toward the lofty aspirations of suffering and thinking humanity, has evolved toward theosophical science, a true treasure trove of the most precious knowledge, an inexhaustible sacred source whose divine waters can only be drunk by mouths of purity and wisdom.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Jean Delville, 'L'Attente', in *Les Splendeurs Méconnues*, 161–162.

⁷⁸ See Flaurette Gautier, 'Jean Delville et l'occulture, fin de siècle' (Master II diss., Université François Rabelais, 2011–2012), 191ff.

⁷⁹ Jean Delville, 'À propos de la Sagesse Antique. Conférence de Mme Annie Besant', *Le Thyrse* 1:9 (1 September 1899), 65–66. Besant published the details of the conference the following year in Delville's theosophically orientated journal *La Lumière*. See Annie Besant, 'De la Sagesse

The influence of Besant, and the Theosophical movement, on Delville was notably evident in a passage in his *La Mission de l'Art* (1900) where he declared his acknowledgement of the syncretic doctrine of Theosophy (conveyed through the Theosophical Society), which conveys the *Universal Wisdom* that transmits the ancient esoteric teachings to modern times and which, moreover, underlies the unity of all religions, and the unity of all peoples, a notion that Delville promoted throughout his writings during this period:

In the history of philosophical doctrines, Universal Wisdom shines with the purest brilliance. Successive generations of Eastern and Western initiates transmitted it, unaltered, through centuries of alternating obscurity and light, until modern times, where it manifests today under the guidance of two powerful doctrinal bodies: *Martinism* and the *Theosophical Society*. The former represents the Western tradition, while the latter originates from India, through the august and immemorial Brahminic initiation, yet both are in perfect unity of teaching. Despite what orthodoxies may think, it is through this Wisdom that the great principle of the *Unity of Religions* will be established in the world, for it is precisely in the realization of this principle that the divine elements of universal brotherhood are found, which make humanity a single *Living Being*—that is to say, individuals, peoples, and races are members of a single body: Humanity. This esoteric Wisdom is none other than philosophical Gnosticism, revealed according to the needs of the era for spirits of truth and love, who, in the heart of the invisible, watch over the destiny of humanity; thanks also to the incarnated intelligences of light on earth, whose mission is to illuminate human sciences, religions, literatures, and aesthetics whenever they regress and fall into materialism.⁸⁰

It was probably at this early encounter with Besant in 1899 that Delville was introduced to the Theosophical idea of an *esoteric Christianity* that she later published in her eponymous work two years later in 1901 and that became the basis of Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu*. We recall that Delville had already begun sketching ideas for *L'Homme-Dieu*, which he took with him to his new post in Glasgow the following year, eventually to be exhibited in 1903. In the same review of Besant's lecture, Delville noted that Christianity was a continuation of ancient spiritual traditions and that it represented a natural continuation in the line of succession of the 'Ancient Wisdom':

The entire pure and mysterious Christology of the Chaldeans, Egyptians, Hindus, Persians, and Greeks, who knew the symbol of the Cross before the coming of Jesus Christ, indeed proves that *ancient Wisdom* is a *revealed science* whose unity is clearly perceived beneath the apparent divergences of esoteric-based cults. It is therefore fitting not to separate ... Christianity from this *Science of the Soul*, nor to regard it as a heretical deviation. This Gnosis, or ancient Wisdom, is truly the integral Christianity, fundamental, and all general Christian theories have indisputably arisen from it. For ancient Wisdom is universal Wisdom ... Primitive mysticism, that is, prior to modern theological orthodoxy, does not come to deny or completely destroy the latter. It comes, radiant with knowledge

Antique. La Fraternité', *La Lumière*, 9 (Thursday 11 February 1900), 1.

⁸⁰ Delville, *La Mission de l'Art*, 101–102, emphasis in original.

and truth, to illuminate it, to make it more translucent, and to transform the dull block of stone it has become into a diamond of dazzling psychic illumination capable of regenerating the human race. Did not Jesus Christ, the divine founder of Christianity, which is none other than a necessary adaptation of ancient Wisdom, the Science of the Mysteries, say to the sectarian clerics of Pharisaic formalism: ‘Woe to you who have seized the key to knowledge and, not having entered its sanctuaries, have also closed them to others’.⁸¹

With this association between Delville and Besant in mind, we can more clearly understand his conceptualisation of his Christ figure in his *L’Homme-Dieu*. On the one hand, the figure of Christ, and the mass of figures, is an esoteric expression of his Theosophical belief (already indicated) that humanity evolves from the earthy to the spiritual and, for the few who escape the bounds of material reality through *Initiation*, can attain the state of a mystical Christhood. On the other hand, from an exoteric point of view, Delville’s representation of Christ can also be viewed as representing a conflation of three key episodes in the biblical life of Christ, simultaneously drawing together in one image the Crucifixion, Transfiguration, and Ascension—the understanding of which is refracted through the precepts of esoteric Theosophy. It will be useful first to examine these references associated with their respective biblical narratives, while relating them to their esoteric conception in the context of the initiatory paradigm outlined in Besant’s *Esoteric Christianity*. It is worth noting that Delville wrote of his admiration of Besant’s *Esoteric Christianity*, a work that undoubtedly influenced his concept of the hidden mystical aspect of the Christ in his *L’Homme-Dieu*: ‘It is this *hidden aspect of Christianity* that Annie Besant so admirably and perfectly illuminates in her work *Esoteric Christianity*, a work that can be considered one of the most beautiful and accurate glorifications of the Teaching of Christ’.⁸²

The Crucifixion: Sacrifice and Universal Compassion

In Delville’s *L’Homme-Dieu*, the Christ figure, with head tilted and arms outstretched, evokes the traditional iconography of the Crucifixion, symbolising Christ’s sacrificial death to redeem humanity (Matthew 27:32–56; John 19:16–30). However, Delville reinterpreted this motif, transforming the physical suffering of Christ into a message of universal compassion and spiritual transformation. In *L’Homme-Dieu*, Christ’s upward-facing palms diverge from the traditional bloodied nailed hands of the traditional crucifixion, suggesting a message of embrace or benediction, of openness, universal acceptance and compassion, drawing the figures towards him and emphasising spiritual liberation rather than physical suffering. The upward-facing palms can also hint at a posture of prayer or receptivity, aligning with Christian themes of humility and connection to the divine. By altering the position of the hands, Delville suggested a message of universal acceptance, rather than physical suffering and bodily torment. The wing-like spread of Christ’s diaphanous tunic and surrounding radiant ovoid aureole softens the motif of sacrifice while emphasising a message of spiritual triumph over corporeal pain. Delville’s Christ is a transcendent figure of divine, compassionate love, rather than a tortured martyr.

Nonetheless, the outstretched arms do, in fact, allude to the drama of the Crucifixion and therefore Christ’s role as the sacrificial redeemer who takes on humanity’s suffering. One is

⁸¹ Jean Delville, ‘À propos de la Sagesse Antique’, 65–66.

⁸² Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 139, emphasis in original.

reminded of the motif of redemption in the mass of anguished figures at the bottom of the composition, who surge in a relentless upward vortex as they evolve towards the Christ figure. The upright figures closest to Delville's Christ represent the essential theme of this work, namely, the transformative power of spiritual redemption through divine compassion as well as the transcendence of suffering through love. Their bodies become lighter and eventually fade into the brightness surrounding the Christ figure, symbolising the soul's liberation, or redemption, from material limitations. But this configuration of his Christ figure has important resonances in esoteric Theosophy as well, regarding the soul's evolution towards divinity through sacrifice and the shedding of personal desire and attachment to the material world, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Additionally, the Crucifixion theme directly relates to Delville's broader artistic mission and vision expressed in his *Mission de l'Art* (1900) for an artistic praxis that is socially transformative and that uplifts viewers through spiritual or *Ideal Beauty* and harmony. Intended for a public setting, the work is a call to a spiritual awakening and transcendence and serves as a manifesto for a reformed spiritual art as well as a catalyst for moral and spiritual reform, inspiring viewers to aspire towards harmony and divine love.

In Besant's esoteric Christology, the Crucifixion is symbolic of the personal sacrifice necessary in the initiatory quest to overcome the physical limitations that act as a blockade to spiritual progress. In the ancient solar myths, the crucifixion is related to the 'crossing over' of the deity: 'The Sun-God is sometimes found sculptured within the circle of the horizon, with the head and feet touching the circle at north and south, and the outstretched hands at east and west—He was crucified'. After this he rises triumphantly and ascends into heaven ... The God who is born at the dawning of December 25th is ever crucified at the spring equinox, and ever gives his life as food to his worshippers—these are among the most salient marks of the Sun-God'.⁸³ In esoteric Christianity, the incarnation of the Christ is represented in the decent of the Logos into Matter. The crucifixion is a symbolic sacrifice of the Christ/Logos that spiritualises the human material condition resulting in the outpouring of His divinity throughout humanity:

Then come the early workings of the Logos in matter ... Matter imprisons ... This is the Logos of whom Plato said that He was in the figure of a cross on the universe; this is the Heavenly Man, standing in space, with arms outstretched in blessing; this is the Christ crucified, whose death on the cross of matter fills all matter with His life. Dead He seems and buried out of sight, but He rises again clothed in the very matter in which He seemed to perish, and carries up His body of now radiant matter into heaven, where it receives the downpouring life of the Father, and becomes the vehicle of man's immortal life. For it is the life of the Logos which forms the garment of the Soul in man, and He gives it that men may live through the ages and grow to the measure of His own stature. Truly are we clothed in Him, first materially and then spiritually. He sacrificed Himself to bring many sons into glory, and He is with us always, even to the end of the age.⁸⁴

This 'body of now radiant matter' of the *Christ/Logos* is represented patently in Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu* in the physical radiance of his Christ figure as well as the surrounding luminescent aureole, which bear striking resemblance to Besant's crucified figure described

⁸³ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 159.

⁸⁴ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 182–183.

above as the ‘Heavenly Man, standing in space, with arms outstretched in blessing’. In another vivid passage she described the Crucified figure of the *Logos/Christ* from which Delville could well have derived the Christ figure in his *L’Homme-Dieu*: ‘No longer is there any thought of pain or sorrow connected with that figure ... rather is it now the symbol of the purest joy the world can hold ... for it typifies the Divine Man standing in space with arms upraised in blessing, casting abroad His gifts to all humanity ...’.⁸⁵

Thus for Besant, the Crucifixion of Christ is symbolic of a larger cosmic mystery and is symbolic of the: ‘great kosmic sacrifice and the allegorical representation of this in the physical Mysteries, and the sacred symbol ... became materialised into an actual death by Crucifixion, and a crucifix bearing a dying human form ... was attached to the Divine Teacher, Jesus, and became the story of His physical death’.⁸⁶ For the Theosophists, this Gospel narrative of the Crucifixion is also symbolic of a personal initiatory path that leads toward the manifestation of inner divinity, the Christ within:

... there is another Christ of the Mysteries, close and dear to the human heart—the Christ of the human Spirit, the Christ who is in every one of us, is born and lives, is crucified, rises from the dead, and ascends into heaven, in every suffering and triumphant ‘Son of Man’. Every man is a potential Christ, and the unfolding of the Christ-life in a man follows the outline of the Gospel story in its striking incidents, which we have seen to be universal, and not particular.

The Crucifixion is also enacted in the initiatory path as a descent: a scourging of the material life of the lower world and a sacrifice of desire and material attachments that leads to a sense of grief, loneliness, and defeat. Once purged, the soul’s passage—once ‘death’ is conquered—is upwards once again from darkness to light towards mystical Sonship:

Yet, summoning all the strength of the ‘unconquerable spirit’, the lower life is yielded up, its death is willingly embraced, the body of desire is abandoned, and the Initiate ‘descends into hell’, that no region of the universe he is to help may remain untrodden by him, that none may be too outcast to be reached by his all-embracing love. And then springing upwards from the darkness, he sees the light once more, feels himself again as the Son, inseparable from the Father whose he is, rises to the life that knows no ending, radiant in the consciousness of death faced and overcome.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 207.

⁸⁶ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 183.

⁸⁷ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 190. On p. 206 Besant wrote: ‘That circumscription, that self-limitation, is the act of sacrifice, a voluntary action done for love’s sake, that other lives may be born from Him. Such a manifestation has been regarded as a death, for, in comparison with the unimaginable life of God in Himself, such circumscription in matter may truly be called death. It has been regarded, as we have seen, as a crucifixion in matter, and has been thus figured, the true origin of the symbol of the cross, whether in its so-called Greek form, wherein the vivifying of matter by the Holy Ghost is signified, or in its so-called Latin, whereby the Heavenly Man is figured, the supernal Christ’.

For Delville and the Theosophists the Crucifixion is therefore a personal sacrifice of the material world of desire and attachment (of the material, physical and emotional) and the attendant suffering that ensues from that relentless quest for physical satisfaction. But this sacrifice is also ‘the secret of evolution’⁸⁸ that drives the soul’s development towards the teleological goal of achieving the realisation of its unity with all life. The sacrifice through the symbolic Crucifixion is not about torment, suffering, and sorrow but a release and an expansion of the soul and ‘the birth of the soul into a fuller life’, the realisation of its unity with all life, and the joy that accompanies the outcome of that sacrifice:

In every form, in mineral, in vegetable, in animal, in man, this expansive energy of the Logos is ceaselessly working. That is the evolutionary force, the lifting life within the forms ... Through that perpetual sacrifice of the Logos all lives exist; it is the life by which the universe is ever becoming. This life is One, but it embodies itself in myriad forms, ever drawing them together and gently overcoming their resistance. Thus it is an At-one-ment, a unifying force, by which the separated lives are gradually made conscious of their unity, labouring to develop in each a self-consciousness, which shall at last know itself to be one with all others, and its root One and divine ... This is the primary and ever-continued sacrifice, and it will be seen that it is an outpouring of Life directed by Love ... Sacrifice, then, in its primary meaning, is a thing of joy; the Logos pours Himself out to make a world, and, seeing the travail of His soul, is satisfied.⁸⁹

The Transfiguration: Divine Radiance and Inner Divinity

The radiant Christ figure in *L’Homme-Dieu* vividly evokes the biblical episode of the *Transfiguration*, where Christ reveals his divine nature to his disciples (Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8). Golden light emanates from within the entire body of the Christ figure in this work,

⁸⁸ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 207–208.

⁸⁹ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 208–211. The symbolism of sacrifice plays a central role in esoteric Theosophy, particularly regarding the rites associated with the soul’s evolution through initiation. Besant articulated this concept in what she referred to as ‘*The Law of Sacrifice*’, which she expressed as follows: ‘When we come to study it as one of the Lesser Mysteries, we shall feel that for its understanding some spiritual development is needed, some opening of the inner eyes. To grasp it requires that its spirit should be partly evolved in the life, and only those who know practically something of the meaning of self-surrender will be able to catch a glimpse of what is implied in the esoteric teaching on this doctrine, as the typical manifestation of the Law of Sacrifice. We can only understand it as applied to the Christ, when we see it as a special manifestation of the universal law, a reflection below of the Pattern above, showing us in a concrete human life what sacrifice means. The Law of Sacrifice underlies our system and all systems, and on it all universes are builded [*sic*]. It lies at the root of evolution, and alone makes it intelligible’. Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 200–201.

Delville invoked this concept when he wrote: ‘The phenomenal universe is nothing but movement and transformation, but these are driven by the initial Law of Sacrifice by which everything evolves. The universal manifestation of evolving and divine energy is the effect of a cause. Every effect is necessarily the result of a cause, and no one can deny it. The cause always represents a maximum of power which engenders minimal effects’. Delville, *Le Mystère de l’Evolution*, 23.

illuminating his physical being as well as surrounding him in a radiant aureole of light spreading outwards in an ovoid, brilliant spectrum. This luminous aura dispels the surrounding, ominous clouds to reveal the azure celestial world beyond. This motif of light emanating from within the face and body of the Christ figure draws a parallel between Delville's image of Christ and the Christ of the biblical *Transfiguration* where Christ revealed radiantly His godhead and divine essence to His disciples: 'His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light' (Matthew 17:1–8). The golden radiance emanating from the Christ figure of Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu* is also a reminder of the human and divine aspects embodied in this symbolic figure, as both Man and God (hence the *God-Man* of the title of the painting).

The radiant quality of the Christ figure and his vivid surroundings, set against the darker, contorted figures below, emphasises the stark contrast between their material anguish and His spiritual illumination. The cosmic setting with voluminous clouds, enigmatic bands of energy, and celestial backdrop further enhances this otherworldly, spiritual dimension and resonates with Delville's Theosophical vision of the soul's ascent to the Divine.

The revelation of the divine in the Transfiguration highlights the potential for humanity to aspire to the divine, a central theme in the iconography of Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu*. The diffusion of the figures reaching up towards the Christ figure, becoming themselves beings of light as they approach Him, indicates the potential of humanity to evolve spiritually towards their own inner divinity. This is a central notion in Delville's writings concerning the 'God within us' inspired by esoteric Theosophy concerning initiation and the spiritual evolution of the soul towards divinity (discussed below), with regard to which Delville wrote: 'This, moreover, was the secret aim of all initiations throughout time. They revealed to neophytes the divine nature of man, and to initiates the means of achieving the union of man with God, or the practical knowledge and mystical experience of the Divine within us'.⁹⁰

From the perspective of Delville's aesthetic theory, it is interesting to note that the idea of the divine hidden in matter echoes his idea articulated in his *Mission de l'Art* that behind physical reality, or the artwork itself, lies the hidden Idea—the goal of artistic expression. Therefore, the artwork is understood to act as a gateway to the revelation of this inner, hidden aspect of an artwork that expresses Ideal or Spiritual Beauty. This embodies Delville's vision of art acting as a bridge to divine revelation and human transcendence.

The Ascension: Exaltation and Collective Redemption

In *L'Homme-Dieu*, Delville's Christ figure, elevated above the contorted mass of humanity, with arms outstretched in benediction, evokes the biblical episode of the *Ascension*, where Christ ascends to heaven after blessing His disciples (Luke 24:50–61; Acts 1:9–11). The elevated position of the Christ figure dominates the upper third of the canvas, while the upward surge of humanity below, reaching upwards with outstretched arms, creates an effective visual narrative of ascent closely tracking the biblical narrative of the Ascension of Jesus: 'When Jesus had led them out as far as Bethany, He lifted up His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He left them and was carried up into heaven' (Luke 24:50–51). The swirling cosmic energies represented in the dynamic undertow of blue ethereal currents suggest a spiritual trajectory toward a divine realm, expressed symbolically in the unearthly backdrop. The Christ figure's upturned palms, suggesting benediction or supplication, convey a blessing that invites humanity to follow him into spiritual exaltation.

⁹⁰ Delville, *Le Christ revivra*, 288.

In the biblical account, the Ascension marks Christ's return to the divine after his earthly mission, promising humanity's eventual redemption and the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). This event signifies the fulfilment of Christ's role as mediator between God and humanity, a theme Delville visualised through the Christ figure's role as a beacon drawing the woeful mass of humanity upward. The transition of the massed human figures from a fused, tormented state at the bottom to individualised, ethereal forms near the Christ figure mirrors this promise of transfiguration, suggesting a collective spiritual rebirth. Delville's Theosophical reinterpretation, drawn from Besant's writings, elevates the Ascension to a symbol of humanity's teleological goal: 'The Ascension for humanity is when the whole race has attained the Christ condition'.⁹¹

In *Le Mystère de l'Évolution*, Delville described humanity's evolution through hierarchical stages: sensational, emotional, and spiritual—culminating in union with the Divine, a process visualised in the painting's ascending composition. For Besant, the Ascension was the final stage leading the initiate to the union with the Divine, the 'hidden' God, or God within, she wrote:

The Ascension of the Christ was the Mystery of the third part of the spiritual body, the putting on of the Vesture of Glory, preparatory to the union of the Son with the Father, of man with God, when the Spirit re-entered the glory it had 'before the world was'. Then the triple Spirit becomes one, knows itself eternal, and the Hidden God is found. That is imaged in the doctrine of the Ascension, so far as the individual is concerned.⁹²

The notion of the union with the Divine was central to Delville's Theosophical writings, where he emphasised that this fundamental spiritual goal ought to be the basis of all religions and lies at the heart of the truly mystical and esoterically practical sense of religious life:

God is a positive reality. It is outside orthodox religions that this reality must now be sought: in the free blossoming of souls, under the vivifying sun of inner life. Instead of nurturing the true divine fire within us, the priests of cults allow it to extinguish. They have long lost the truly mystical and esoterically practical sense of religious life. Yet, in their profound and precise meaning, Religion and Yoga are one and the same. Through Religion, man can be connected to the Divine. Through Yoga, man can be united with the Divine. It is identically the same goal to achieve, the same result to obtain. Thus, the immediate practical application of this union with the Divine should constitute the entirety of Religion.⁹³

Delville's depiction of the evolutionary path of the shadowy and desperate figures in his *L'Homme-Dieu* towards the luminescent Cosmic Christ can be more plainly understood in light of the above discussion where the symbolism of the *Crucifixion* has important Theosophical associations regarding the notion of *sacrifice* that is the necessary first step towards the soul's evolution towards the realisation of the Christ within. By integrating the *Crucifixion*, *Transfiguration*, and *Ascension*, Delville's Christ figure in *L'Homme-Dieu* becomes a composite symbol of sacrifice, divine revelation, and spiritual transformation. These biblical motifs converge to articulate a Theosophical Christology, where Christ is both a historical figure and a

⁹¹ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 250.

⁹² Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 249–250.

⁹³ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 275.

mystical archetype of spiritual initiation, as outlined in Annie Besant's *Esoteric Christianity*. Delville's syncretic depiction, with Oriental or Semitic features, reflects his belief in the unity of Christ and Buddha as manifestations of divine Truth and universal Love, as articulated in *Le Christ revivra* (1913). Ultimately, *L'Homme-Dieu* embodies Delville's mission to reform Christian art, creating a spiritual art that transcends dogma and elevates humanity's consciousness through Ideal Beauty articulated through the nude. The monumental scale of *L'Homme-Dieu* is intended to underscore its role as an aesthetic catalyst, inspiring viewers to aspire toward this vision of the spiritual potential in humanity. This Ascension motif is, moreover, suggested in *Prométhée* (1907), where the light-bearing Titan draws humanity upward, in an awakening towards spiritual ascension, as well as in *L'Amour des Âmes*, where the souls ascend in a cosmic embrace (see below). Thus the Ascension in *L'Homme-Dieu* is both a Theosophical narrative of divine aspiration and humanity's collective inner spiritual potential, (once again) implicitly referring to Delville's ideal of art as a transformative force for spiritual and social renewal.

Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu*: Theosophy and the Cosmic Christ of the Mysteries

Delville's depiction of the transfigured and radiant Christ figure in *L'Homme-Dieu*, drawing humanity towards him, also reflects the beliefs of his Theosophical contemporaries, as well as Delville himself, about the immanent return of the Christ, embodied in their notion of the World Teacher or the *Lord Maitreya* on the one hand, as well as, most significantly, the notion that there is a hidden spark of divinity in mankind that they seek to manifest through an initiatory path that, according to both Delville and the Theosophists, transfigures individual humanity from the Material to the Absolute, or from the physical to the spiritual through the manifestation of the Divine, or Christ consciousness within. This is the initiatory path discussed amongst Theosophists at the time and referred to extensively by Annie Besant as well as Delville himself (see previous). In other words, humanity can transcend its material condition of physical suffering and manifest this liberating inner spiritual spark of life, a transcendent manifestation of the higher Self, the inner divinity, or the Christ consciousness within. The painting alludes to this Theosophical idea, widely expressed in Delville's poetry and writings from this period onwards, that suggests that this evolution is a personal, inward process rather than an outward process mediated through institutional doctrine, the goal of which is to manifest the hidden spiritual potential in humankind. Delville first articulated these ideas in a lecture published in 1905 titled *Dieu en Nous* and was later elaborated upon in detail in his extensive Theosophical study *Le Christ revivra* of 1913, where he wrote:

Let each man become a revelation to himself.

And when the immortal spirit of man has taken possession of the temple of his body, having driven out the money-changers and all impure things, his divine humanity will be what saves him; for, when he is thus united with himself, he will also know 'the builder of the Temple'. This 'builder of the Temple' is the Deity within us. And this Deity has nothing to do with the extra-cosmic and anthropomorphic God still presented to the feeble imagination of believing crowds. That Deity is not found in a specific form, but in every atom of visible and invisible life. It is the uncreated and eternal Nature in which

resides the universal Power of the Evolution of the external forms of the Cosmos. It is as much in man as in the universe.⁹⁴

This spiritual, inner evolutionary process is reflected symbolically in his *L'Homme-Dieu* in the metamorphosis of the figures from a dark, anguished, earth-bound condition depicted below towards upright figures reaching towards, and merging with, the image of the radiant *Cosmic Christ*; revealing at once an exoteric—physical or material evolution—as well as an esoteric, or inner soul-based evolutionary process—from the physical to the spiritual potential in humankind. The Christ figure in *L'Homme-Dieu* is simultaneously a representation of the historical Christ and of the symbolic, mystical goal of the personal spiritual evolutionary path described in contemporary Theosophical texts, as well as in Delville's writings and poetry from this time onwards. Besant describes the birth of this inner Christ through initiation:

At the first great Initiation the Christ is born in the disciple; it is then that he realises for the first time in *himself* the outpouring of the divine Love, and experiences that marvellous change which makes him feel himself to be one with all that lives. This is the 'Second Birth', and at that birth the heavenly ones rejoice, for he is born into 'the kingdom of heaven, as one of the "little ones", as "a little child"—the names ever given to the new Initiates.⁹⁵

The notion of the inner Cosmic Christ was a recurring theme in contemporary Theosophical literature and was a central subject of esoteric Christianity amongst Theosophical writers. The earliest and most influential was *The Perfect Way; or The Finding of Christ*⁹⁶ by the English Theosophist Anna Kingsford (co-authored by Edward Maitland) of 1882. The work was translated by Édouard Schuré in 1891 as *La Voie Parfaite ou Le Christ Esotérique*.⁹⁷ Schuré reprised the theme in his influential book *Les Grands Initiés: Esquisse de l'histoire secrète des religions* (1889), which culminated in a final section on the historical Jesus. However, Schuré's most detailed discussion of the theme of the Cosmic Christ appeared in his later work, *l'évolution divine: du sphinx au Christ* (1912). Delville was closely connected to Schuré, who prefaced Delville's *La Mission de l'Art*. Schuré's unreserved endorsement of Delville's book would have provided significant encouragement for the artist in his evolution towards Theosophy at the turn of the century.⁹⁸ As already indicated, Delville came into contact with Schuré in

⁹⁴ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 280–281.

⁹⁵ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 185, emphasis in original.

⁹⁶ Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland, *The Perfect Way; or The Finding of Christ* (London: Leadenhall Press, 1882).

⁹⁷ Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland, *La voie parfaite ou le Christ esotérique*, trans. Édouard Schuré (Alençon: Imprimerie Typographique F. Guy, 1891).

⁹⁸ In the Preface to Delville's *La Mission de l'Art*, Schuré wrote of the artist: 'Here is the book of a true young man; a book of courage and nobility, a beacon of light in times of darkness. An act of a thinker, an artist, and an inspired visionary, a testament to knowledge, enthusiasm, and faith, it attempts an act of initiation and renewal' (p. v). 'Jean Delville's *The Mission of Art* is a manifesto of Integral Idealism according to Universal Theosophy' (p. vi). He continued: 'This book seems to have been written in a single breath, under such a continuous and imperative influx that the author has not even considered dividing it into chapters. I do not know what

March 1899 when he attended Schuré's lecture on his forthcoming play *Les enfants de Lucifer* (1900). It will be suggested further on that Schuré's play was a pivotal influence in Delville's art produced at the turn of the century, notably his *L'Amour des Âmes* (1900), *L'Homme-Dieu* (1903), and *Prométhée* (1907).

As already indicated, the direct Theosophical influence on Delville regarding the theme of the *Cosmic Christ*, in relation to his *L'Homme-Dieu*, would surely have derived from his association with Annie Besant, and most particularly her *Esoteric Christianity*, published in 1901, which discusses the theme in detail. In this seminal work, Besant argued that Christianity, like other great world religions, possesses a deeper, mystical tradition that has been largely overlooked or denied in modern times and outlines, further, the Theosophical framework of three aspects of the esoteric Christ, that eschews traditional doctrinaire and orthodox teachings, namely: first, the *Historical Christ*; second, the *Mythic Christ*; and third, the *Mystical Christ*. That Delville was highly influenced by Besant's work, with regard to this triadic formulation of mystical Christianity in his conceptualisation of his *L'Homme-Dieu* is vividly revealed in a letter sent to his friend, the artist Henri Mortiaux, towards the end of his life, dated 1 January 1951. The letter is an important artistic statement by Delville concerning this work in which he articulates unequivocally his intentions behind his *L'Homme-Dieu* that track closely the ideas outlined in Besant's *Esoteric Christianity*. This important late statement concerning his work is worth quoting in full:

You ask me to explain the spiritual meaning of my painting *L'Homme-Dieu*.

The composition of *L'Homme-Dieu* embodies a mystical aspect of esoteric Christianity, for, in reality, Christianity has three dimensions: Historical, Mystical, and Mythical. The Church, however, has lost sight of this to some extent by recognizing primarily only its historical aspect, despite the gaps and interpretations this entails. The Mystical aspect of Christ reveals the inner influence on the human being, on the human heart—it is the truly divine Jesus, something more mysterious than the Jesus of the Church, because it highlights the divine aspect within man. It is something loftier than the Church's Way of the Cross, which presents to the masses only the external aspect of Jesus' historical life. Thus, I conceived this artistic vision of *L'Homme-Dieu*, emphasizing the idea and forms, and depicting the suffering and aspiring human mass reaching toward the compassionate Heart of Christ, whose Love is symbolised by the vast radiance of His aura.

In the upper part of the composition, a group of souls is shown, in which the divine principle is more developed than in the lower, suffering mass of humanity. This is not,

strikes me most in this work, both so young and so mature, so vibrant and so strong—whether it is the artist's soul yearning for eternal Beauty that one feels pulsing through every line—or the mind of the initiated philosopher that so lightly and naturally rises to divine principles—or the proud courage of the young idealist who throws himself into the fray without fear of blows and wounds with the flaming sword of his word and the shield of his faith. Were we faint-hearted enough to recommend caution to him, he would proudly reply: "The artist who lacks awareness of a divine force fertilising his human strength into Beauty and who, in the depths of his being, does not feel the God of Love and Harmony beneath whom pulsates worlds and all humanity—is not worthy of a civilisation" (pp. xxii–xxiii). The Preface was dated 'Noel 1899', which suggests that Schuré's involvement in writing the preface was arranged not too long after they met in March 1899.

therefore, the idea of a judgment by Christ, but rather the mystical power of this Great Teacher drawing toward Himself, into the Light of His divine Being, all the suffering of Humanity. It is, indeed, this Christian Ideal, which is far from orthodox but represents Christianity in its purest essence, from the newborn Child brought into the world by the mother (at the very bottom of the composition), for Life is the Spirit in All.⁹⁹

Besant outlined the three facets of the *esoteric Christ* as follows: First, in her discussion of her notion of the *Historical Christ*, she did not deny the existence of a historical Jesus but reframed His significance within a broader esoteric context. She suggested that the historical Jesus was an initiate into the esoteric traditions, delivering teachings that included both exoteric messages for the masses and esoteric ‘Mysteries’ reserved for a select few. Concerning the historical Christ she wrote:

The historical Christ, then, is a glorious Being belonging to the great spiritual hierarchy that guides the spiritual evolution of humanity ... He instructed in the deeper truths of the spiritual life; who drew men to Him by the singular love and tenderness and the rich wisdom that breathed from His Person; ... Round this glorious Figure gathered the myths which united Him to the long array of His predecessors, the myths telling in allegory the story of all such lives, as they symbolise the work of the Logos in the Kosmos and the higher evolution of the individual human soul.¹⁰⁰

Second, in her discussion of the *Mythical Christ* she argued that this is a symbolic archetype reflecting universal truths, akin to solar myths and the *Logos*, shared across religions. Much as Schuré outlined in his *Les grands initiés*, Besant asserted that the *Mythical Christ* is thus part of a broader tradition of divine teachers (e.g., Krishna, Buddha) who embody eternal truths. The *Mythical Christ* is identified with the *Logos*, a universal principle of divine manifestation present in all religions. This transcends the historical Jesus, connecting him to a timeless, cosmic narrative.¹⁰¹

These Sun myths, ever recurring throughout the ages ... are really the stories not of a particular individual named Jesus but of the universal Christ; of a Man who symbolised a Divine Being, and who represented a fundamental truth in nature ... He was, as are all such, the ‘Son of Man’, a peculiar and distinctive title, the title of an office, not of an individual. The Christ of the Solar Myth was the Christ of the Mysteries.¹⁰²

Finally, for Besant, the *Mystical Christ* represents the inner, spiritual reality that individuals can experience through initiation and esoteric practice. This is the core of Besant’s argument in her *Esoteric Christianity*, emphasising personal transformation and union with the divine. The Mystical Christ is the divine presence within each person, accessible through the Lesser and Greater Mysteries. The Mysteries lead initiates to a state of ecstasy or union with God, where the

⁹⁹ Jean Delville, ‘Letter to Henri Mortiaux’, 1 January 1951, private collection. Transcription received privately from Delville’s granddaughter, Miriam Delville.

¹⁰⁰ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 140–141.

¹⁰¹ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 145ff.

¹⁰² Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 169.

Mystical Christ is realised. The Mystical Christ is thus the goal of this initiatory path. For Delville, individuals are bearers of this inner divinity and are the living temples of the expression of this inner spirit of the divine centred on the human heart, which is the core of divine life and through which humans can discover the Divine within themselves and others. Delville believed that *union with the Divine* is the natural destination of the soul's evolution toward its divine identity through love and wisdom:

Indeed, the true temple, the true sanctuary of the Divine, resides within man. The external temple of religion is never more than a material symbol of a living reality. Architecturally, Christian temples are constructed according to the synthesis of the human form. The symbol of the Cross is the symbol of man, of divine man. Within every temple exists the tabernacle, a symbol of the secret place where the Divine is concealed. This tabernacle is, in itself, the symbol of the human heart, the centre of divine life, the radiant source of indivisible light where the God within us is manifested. God has become man in all men. However veiled or enveloped He may be beneath the thick layers of the unconscious outer personality, man can discover God within himself and in others. What is called 'union with the Divine' is the evolution of the soul toward its divine identification through Love and Wisdom.¹⁰³

Moreover, Besant framed the Mystical Christ as part of *Theosophia* or *Divine Wisdom*, which is not exclusive to Christianity but belongs to all religions. The *Mystical Christ* restores the hidden teachings lost to popular Christianity, aiming to elevate humanity spiritually: 'The Christ of the human heart is, for the most part, Jesus seen as the mystic human Christ, struggling, suffering, dying, finally triumphant, the Man in whom humanity is seen crucified and risen, ... the Christ who can never be forgotten while He is born again and again in humanity, while the world needs Saviours, and Saviours give themselves for men'.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, for Besant, the *Mystical Christ* is the goal of the initiate and a climax of spiritual evolution within the individual:

The Mystic Christ, then, is twofold—the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity, descending into matter, and the Love, or second aspect of the unfolding Divine Spirit in man. The one represents cosmic processes carried on in the past and is the root of the Solar Myth; the other represents a process carried on in the individual, the concluding stage of his human evolution, and added many details in the Myth. Both of these have contributed to the Gospel story, and together form the Image of the 'Mystic Christ'.¹⁰⁵

Delville believed that Christianity and Buddhism, at their core, pursue the same spiritual objective: awakening the inner divine presence. In Christianity, this is represented by the *esoteric Christ*, and in Buddhism by the *Buddhi*. Both traditions focus on activating the spiritual ego, embodying divine love, which manifests through the heart as the vital centre of life: 'The Christian experience and the Buddhist experience are, at their core, identical: both seek to awaken the inner god, the divine within us. Whether it is Christos for Christians or Buddhi for Buddhists, it concerns the awakening in man of the sixth Principle, the spiritual Ego, Divine

¹⁰³ Delville, *Le Christ revivra*, 284.

¹⁰⁴ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 191.

¹⁰⁵ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 178.

Love, which finds its correspondence and expression in that centre of life we call the Heart'.¹⁰⁶ For Delville the heart is the centre of one's essential spirituality and inner divinity, expressed through a spiritual radiance that manifests in evolved beings as the *Logos*, or *Divine Love*:

... it is the heart that is the gushing Source of what is best, purest, and most divine in a being ... For the heart is, simultaneously, the centre of physical life and the centre of spiritual life. The spiritual man resides entirely, not in the brain, but in the heart. It is through the heart that the man who aspires to one day become a 'Savior of the World' will, through the growing effort of his successive lives, ultimately manifest the human *Logos*, that is to say, divine Love for all beings.¹⁰⁷

There is convincing evidence to suggest that Delville intended to articulate the idea of Divine Love radiating from the heart of his Christ figure in his original conception of *L'Homme-Dieu*. This is apparent in a developed study for the work (London: Private Collection, **Fig. 5**). In this study, the radiating beams of light emanating from the Christ figure converge around the locus of his heart, which is emphasised through a distinct circle of light positioned over the heart area. This was made more subtle in the final version where the radiant beams of light are retained, but Delville eliminated the focal emphasis over the heart.

The above discussion outlines the complex iconographical nature of Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu* and its debt to contemporary esoteric Theosophy. However, what is most interesting about the circumstances of the creation of this work is that Delville seems to have formulated his artistic concept of both his *L'Homme-Dieu* and *Prométhée* at the same time, which suggests that they were somehow connected in his overall conception of the artistic and Theosophical programme from which these paintings emerged. It will be suggested in the discussion to follow to what extent this may be the case. We suggest that the direct visual evidence for this connection stems, most likely, from Schuré's play, *Les enfants de Lucifer* (1900), a draft of which Delville encountered in early 1899. An analysis of the narrative and symbolism of this play contributes much to the understanding of Delville's *L'Homme-Dieu* as well as further interpretative aspects that connect this painting directly to his *L'Amour des Âmes* and *Prométhée*. It is believed that this analysis will reveal an overall Theosophical framework for these three works as well as their interconnected iconographical programme, to which Delville was committed in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

¹⁰⁶ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 287.

¹⁰⁷ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 287, 302–303. Delville concluded his essay with an image from an ancient esoteric text illustrating the contrast between the heart of light and the heart of darkness that summarised the core concept of his *L'Homme-Dieu*: 'An ancient image, found in an old mystical book, depicts the body of a man rendered with a dark colour and the body of a man whose form is rendered in white. In place of the heart of the dark man, which symbolises the inferior personality, a serpent is coiled. In contrast, in the figure of the white man, who symbolises the regenerated divine man, the serpent has disappeared to make way for a heart radiating with light and power. The esotericism of this image is deeply significant. We all have, coiled around our heart, the serpent of Illusion, of Selfishness, and Desire. Let pure Love vibrate in our heart, and the serpent will disappear, as in the figure of the white man, and the inner God, the hidden God, the God of Truth and Love will come to shine there like a sun of light and life!' Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 301–302.

Schuré's *Les enfants de Lucifer*: A Source for Delville's Theosophical Artistic Programme from *L'Amour des Âmes* to *Prométhée*

Delville's first encounter with Schuré took place in March 1899 when he attended a lecture by the writer at the *Le Salon de la Libre Esthétique* in Brussels. Schuré's lecture took place on Thursday 16 March 1899 at 'la salle d'angle du Musée de peinture moderne' on the topic of his forthcoming play *Les enfants de Lucifer* (published 1900). Delville's attendance at the lecture was noted in the following edition of *L'Art Moderne*,¹⁰⁸ and Schuré's talk was favourably reviewed in detail in an April edition of that journal.¹⁰⁹ It can also be assumed that Delville's early interest in Theosophy was stirred at this point through this direct encounter with Schuré. When the play was published in early 1900, Delville reviewed the work in his newly established Theosophical publication *La Lumière*, for which he was editor-in-chief.¹¹⁰

Schuré's syncretic approach in his *Les enfants de Lucifer*, already evident in his earlier *Les grandes initiés*, was written under the inspiration of his association with the Theosophical Society.¹¹¹ At the outset, it must be emphasised that, in Theosophical circles, Lucifer was understood as a *Light-Bearer*—a figure distinct from Satan, the opposing *shadow* of Christ—who imparts inspired spiritual knowledge, wisdom, and freedom to humanity. This conception directly parallels their interpretation of the mythological Prometheus, particularly as embodied in Delville's Theosophical avatar of spiritual enlightenment articulated in his *Prométhée* (1907). De Tallenay's review of Schuré's lecture in *L'Art Moderne* emphasised Schuré's view on this problematic figure that the author discussed during his talk in the following: 'In Lucifer (here the author has taken care to specify that his Lucifer has nothing in common with the Satan of the Church. As his name, meaning Light-Bearer, indicates, he symbolises humanity's striving toward knowledge and freedom), who dared to seize the creative fire from the Almighty and who, step by step, reconquers the world amidst the darkness of Pain and Death ...'.¹¹² Schuré would later elaborate on this theme in his *L'Évolution divine: du sphinx au Christ* (1912).

The importance of the content of Schuré's lecture has not been closely examined in relation to Delville's artistic development during the first decade of the new century. Schuré introduced

¹⁰⁸ See Anon., 'Petite Chronique', *L'Art Moderne* 12 (19 March, 1899), 94: 'We shall speak on Sunday next of Mr. Édouard Schuré's beautiful and curious lecture at the *Libre Esthétique*. The drama, of which he read us fragments and which belongs to the "theatre of dreams," is a very harmonious symbolisation of the current struggle and the possible fusion in the future of the two principles of beauty and charity, of paganism and Christianity, of intelligence and love, which we see in conflict around us; and the poet-writer used admirable words to paint and render tangible these very vivid abstractions. In the audience, exceptionally numerous, were Mr. Victor Rousseau, Paul Du Bois, Jean Delville, Fierens-Gevaert, Charles Morice, Mr. Kufferath, H. Maubel, Mrs J. de Tallenay, M. Mali, Blanche Rousseau, A. Boch, etc.'

¹⁰⁹ See J. De Tallenay, 'Le Théâtre du Rêve. Les Enfants de Lucifer, Drame en cinq Actes de M. Édouard Schuré', *L'Art Moderne* 14 (2 April 1899), 105–107.

¹¹⁰ See Delville, 'Le Livres: Le Théâtre de l'Âme, par Édouard Schuré'. *La Lumière* 14 (18 March 1900), 2.

¹¹¹ Schuré was a member from 1884–1886 and then rejoined in 1907–1913. See Massimo Introvigne, 'Zöllner's Knot: Jean Delville (1867–1953), Theosophy, and the Fourth Dimension', *Theosophical History* 17: 3 (July 2014), 95.

¹¹² De Tallenay, 'Le Théâtre du Rêve', 106.

his (yet unpublished) play *Les enfants de Lucifer* (published 1900) in his March 1899 lecture, which included a discussion of its plot as well as readings from sections of the play itself. The lecture to the Belgian audience was well received.¹¹³ I will suggest here that this is a key text underpinning aspects of the iconography of the three Theosophical works that Delville exhibited between 1900 and 1907, namely his *L'Amour des Âmes* (1900), *L'Homme-Dieu* (1903), and *Prométhée* (1907). This influence is most evident in his *L'Amour des Âmes*, but it is most likely that Schuré's play provided the thematic and iconographic programme for all three of the artist's paintings. It is certain that Delville conceived the three works almost simultaneously. We have seen that he already indicated in his autobiography that he undertook initial sketches for *L'Homme-Dieu* and *Prométhée* in 1900 when he left Brussels for his new teaching post in Glasgow, while *L'Amour des Âmes* was exhibited in early 1900 and must have been conceived in late 1899, not long after meeting Schuré. The main thematic and iconographic elements in Schuré's play that influenced Delville, and are evident in his paintings, include the central narrative following the initiatory lovers—whose climactic death is reflected visually, almost verbatim, in Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes*—as well as the Theosophical symbolism invoked throughout the play including the Luciferian five-pointed star and the initiatory cross of the esoteric Christ whose conflation at the end of the play is pivotal. These thematic connections in relation to Delville's *Prométhée* and *L'Homme-Dieu* will be explored in detail further on.

During the 1899 lecture, Schuré introduced his play as a new form of theatre that he referred to as '*Le Théâtre de l'Âme*'; in other words, a form of Idealist theatre that was concerned with the inner life, or the spiritual life of the soul. The review of the lecture in *L'Art Moderne* by de Tallenay noted at the time that this was a type of 'transcendental' theatre whose goal was to inspire one to strive for a higher purpose of existence: 'This is indeed the transcendental theatre defined by the author, a theatre that must not merely depict our own life, but elevate the conception we have of existence through the constant vision of the summits to be attained'.¹¹⁴

In outlining Schuré's work, it was noted in the review in *L'Art Moderne* that this new form of theatre with its 'revolutionary ideas' was an intense form of Idealist theatre:

Among the modern contenders in the sublime struggle, the author of this inspired book, *The Great Initiates*, shines in the forefront, both for the sustained purity of his entire oeuvre and for his conception of the human being, always regarded at its highest potential. After giving us those esoteric pages, now famous, those novels, those poems where the fervent Love of the Ideal shines unalloyed, he has now brought to Brussels, in the form of a lecture recently delivered at the *Libre Esthétique*, revolutionary ideas concerning the theatre—this medium of action, perhaps more intense than all others!¹¹⁵

Schuré would outline his ideas in detail in the published introduction to his play (which developed from his 1899 lecture) concerning his concept of *Le Théâtre de l'Âme* and emphasised that in this new art form he was aiming to create a form of theatre that arose from the inspiration of the soul to unite man with the Divine by bringing an aspect of the transcendental archetypal world of the Divine into human experience. In doing so, the concept of an Idealist

¹¹³ See brief outline above and the review of the lecture by De Tallenay 'Le Théâtre du Rêve', 105–107.

¹¹⁴ De Tallenay 'Le Théâtre du Rêve', 107.

¹¹⁵ De Tallenay 'Le Théâtre du Rêve', 106.

theatre was wholly in keeping with the theories of Symbolist art and literature developed during the 1890s, of which Delville was one of the leading figures during that period in Belgium.¹¹⁶ Schuré wrote:

There will finally be this theatre of the elite, which could be called the Theatre of the Dream, by its essential organ, and which I call the Theatre of the Soul, by its inspiring centre. It will evoke a superior humanity in the mirror of history, legend, and symbol. This humanity, though ideal, will be no less vibrant with life and truth ... This Theatre of the Dream, this theatre that will recount the Great Work of the Soul in the legend of Humanity, I dare say, will be profoundly and eminently religious. For it will strive to connect the human to the divine, to reveal in earthly man a reflection and a confirmation of that transcendent world, of that Beyond in which we all believe in various ways, if only in the name of infinite sentiments and eternal ideas.¹¹⁷

In this, Schuré most certainly had in mind the work of Richard Wagner and ancient Mystery plays—topics about which he had previously published.¹¹⁸ Schuré made this connection in his introduction to his *Les enfants de Lucifer*:

The ideal theatre, the theatre that educates man and transfigures life, I have long studied in the past. When I wrote the history of *The Great Initiates*, I paid homage to its origins in the sacred dances of India, through the legend of Krishna. In writing the *History of Musical Drama*, I saw it flourish on the slopes of the Acropolis in the tragedy of Athens. In visiting the sanctuaries of the East, I even attempted, despite the incredulous smiles of scholars, the poetic reconstruction of the sacred drama of Eleusis, that arcane of the mysteries of Greece, the religious counterpart and secret key to tragedy.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ See Cole, *Jean Delville*, for a detailed discussion of Delville's Idealist theories of art, especially chap. 4, 149ff. There is a close alignment between Delville's ideas and those of Schuré, which would naturally have brought them together in 1899.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in the 1922 reprinted edition. Schuré, *Les enfants de Lucifer*, xiv–xv, emphasis in original.

The following passage in the *L'Art Moderne* review of Schuré's lecture is essentially a paraphrase of Schuré's words, suggesting that the authors introduction to his play was taken from this original lecture. De Tallenay quoted Schuré's from the section in his lecture in the following: 'The theatre of the dream, which will inevitably be a theatre for an elite, he remarked somewhat sadly, will evoke a superior humanity in the mirror of history, legend, and symbol. It will recount the great work of the soul in the life of Humanity. It will be profoundly and exaltedly religious, for it will seek to reconnect the human with the divine, to reveal in earthly man a reflection and a sanction of that transcendent world, of that Beyond in which we all believe in varying degrees—if only in the name of infinite feelings and eternal ideas. This essentially idealist theatre has been that of all the great creative epochs. But each epoch must give birth to it again according to its own needs'. De Tallenay 'Le Théâtre Du Rêve', 106.

¹¹⁸ Schuré wrote widely on both topics. See for example: Édouard Schuré, *Le drame musical. Richard Wagner, son œuvre et son idée*, 2 vols. (Paris: Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1875); Édouard Schuré, *Le drame sacré d'Eleusis* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1890).

¹¹⁹ Schuré, *Les enfants de Lucifer*, xii.

‘There is no truth but in love and in death!’ Schuré’s *Les enfants de Lucifer* and Delville’s *L’Amour des Âmes*

Schuré’s esoteric play is essentially an initiatory drama exploring the soul’s quest for spiritual freedom against oppressive societal forces. Set in fourth-century Asia Minor, during a period of cultural conflict between Hellenism and Christianity, the two main characters, Théoklès (later named Phosphoros after his initiation) and Cléonice, are free spirits, in love, who seek wisdom, spiritual freedom, and self-awareness. Their love is passionate and transcendent—an *absolute love*, a defining *love of souls*. Despite their contrasting backgrounds, it is through love that they are united, symbolising a union of opposites, the fusion of two ‘magnetic poles’, as it were, resulting in their synthesis into a state of original wholeness, or transcendent unity. In a poignant scene, Cléonice declares her love for Théoklès: ‘I love the Angel of Light and his Hero. The more you curse him, the more I shall love him. For I love him with that love which preceded the birth of the world and will outlast it, that love whence divine souls flowed and which springs from the heart of God. This love dreads nothing, knowing itself immortal’.¹²⁰

Their goal and purpose is spiritual and intellectual freedom. The denouement of the play is a tragedy precipitated by the opposition they encounter from opposing external forces in the form of the political power of Caesar and the ecclesiastical power of the Church. Their ‘victory’ against these forces is only possible through their mortal sacrifice. They are united in death, their souls merging in the flames of the sacrificial fire that surround them. However, their death is articulated as a spiritual triumph, symbolising the esoteric belief in the soul’s immortality and its triumph over material constraints through Divine Love. The play critiques modern society’s neglect of the soul, suppressed by science, political power, the Church, and materialism, and seeks through dramatic expression to revive the *Divine Psyché*—the eternal human spirit.¹²¹ Schuré’s introduction to the play is a rich evocation of the nature of this Idealist animastic love and worth quoting in full as it has a direct bearing on Delville’s *L’Amour des Âmes*, i.e., the ‘love of souls’ that, it will be argued further on, represents the transfigurative ascension of Théoklès/Phosphoros and Cléonice in death. Schuré wrote:

Set within the historical context of the fourth century, at the time of the great struggle between Hellenism and Christianity, which they shatter and transcend with their impetuous souls, the Children of Lucifer aspire to an ideal of Man and Woman that neither History, nor Legend, nor Poetry has yet realised—that of Love in Action. In this drama, the man embodies Hellenism, the woman personifies the Christian soul, and their fusion is achieved through the miracle of Love. What draws them together and unites them is complete, absolute Love, both human and divine, passionate and spiritual, a fecundating Love, a saving and creative Love. Each gives of themselves to the other, and each is resurrected in the other, so that they form a single being whose magnetic poles multiply their power a hundredfold. Phosphoros becomes the consciousness of Cleonice, and Cleonice becomes the soul of Phosphoros. This is why the free couple is liberating. This is why it pours forth a new life around it and, unwittingly, gives birth to a new religion. The free city is born from their radiance.

¹²⁰ Édouard Schuré, *Children of Lucifer: Antique Drama in Five Acts*, trans. Beresford Kemmis (London: Rudolf Steiner Publishing Co., 1935), 110.

¹²¹ Schuré, *Les enfants de Lucifer*, ix.

Yet, in the world into which it is born, such a couple cannot triumph for long. It is destined to succumb in its audacious struggle against Caesar and the Church, and it can affirm its victory only through its death. Thus alone does it bequeath to humanity the testament of its faith under the sign of Lucifer.¹²²

This transcendent union through Love is enacted in the final scene of Schuré's play, which is key in terms of the iconography of Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes*. United in revolt, the Luciferian couple flee the city from which they are excommunicated by the corrupt local Bishop. Théoklès/Phosphoros first returns to the *Temple of the Unknown God*, where he was first initiated by the Hierophant Heraklidos, soon to be joined by Cléonice. The flight from his city, where he was once ruler, is seen as the ultimate act and expression of freedom for Phosphoros, upon which the future freedom of humanity is dependent. Heraklidos proclaims in an aside:

Phosphoros! Phosphoros! Your city is about to crumble. But you, her last hero, herald of a new world, you must proclaim your faith to the end, without walls or comrades to protect you. If now the world were to see you waver, mankind's Hope would sink with its courage to dare. From your example must shine forth a gleam bright enough to illumine the future. Will you have the strength to persevere in the supreme ordeal of seeing your work apparently perish and yet holding fast to your belief, O you, the liberating Hero
...¹²³

It is significant to note at this stage that the Luciferian initiation undertaken by Théoklès in the *Temple of the Unknown God* results in his new name *Phosphoros*—derived from the two Greek roots: φῶς (phōs), meaning 'light', and φέρω (pherō), meaning 'to bear' or 'to carry'. Phosphoros (Φωσφόρος) literally means 'Light-Bearer'. The Latin equivalent is *Lucifer*. Théoklès, in other words, incarnates the role of light-bearer, and the narrative of Schuré's work, and Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes*, which is derived from that work relate directly to this fact. This is also relevant to Delville's *Prométhée*, whose role as another literal Light-Bearer in esoteric Theosophy is discussed further on. In esoteric Theosophy, Phosphoros/Lucifer is occasionally depicted as bearing a flaming torch.¹²⁴

The climactic scene of Schuré's play sees the Roman Army and the Bishop surrounding the Temple in pursuit of the lovers. The mysterious Voice of the Temple reminds Heraklidos that 'The oppressors of the Soul are threatening the Temple of Truth; but the children of Lucifer will save it by a burnt offering. From the sacrifice will issue *the sign of fulfilment*. What is this sacrifice? Mystery'.¹²⁵ Trapped, Phosphoros conjures the spirit of Lucifer and the Mysterious Voice for guidance. He asks the Voice: 'But where shall I find supreme Truth?' to which the

¹²² Schuré, *Les enfants de Lucifer*, xvi–xvii, emphasis added.

¹²³ Schuré *Children of Lucifer*, 115.

¹²⁴ See Blavatsky, 'The History of a Planet', *Lucifer* 1:1 (September 1887), 15–22. On p. 16, Blavatsky refers to Classical Mythology with reference to Phosphoros bearing the flaming torch: 'Phosphoros, the 'luminous morning orb ... is the beautiful morning star' (*Vide* St. John's *Revelation* XXII. 16) loved for its radiant light ... He holds a torch in his hand and flies through space'.

¹²⁵ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 116, emphasis added.

Voice answers: ‘Where the Star of Lucifer shines through the Cross of Christ’.¹²⁶ This image of the Star and the Cross is key as it conjures an important relationship between Lucifer (the Star) and Christ (the Cross)—as related, complementary concepts. This symbol becomes a notable emblem for much of Theosophical thought hereafter, especially in Schuré’s writings and the writings of Rudolf Steiner, with whom Schuré collaborated and who was inspired by the play and its message.¹²⁷ But I will argue further on that this emblem was also at the heart of Delville’s inspiration to create his two monumental works reflecting these themes, and why they were conceived simultaneously around 1900—i.e., *L’Homme-Dieu* representing the Christ (the ‘Cross’) and *Prométhée* representing Lucifer (the Star).

However, the connection to *L’Amour des Âmes* is overtly evident in the closing scenes of the play, when the lovers realise that they cannot escape but refuse to be captured and executed and dramatically decide to end their lives. They become, in fact, the sacrifice that issues ‘the sign of fulfilment’. In a dramatic epiphany, Cléonice embraces her fate, and tragic destiny:

I have chosen it, my Phosphoros, and I love it above all others. Under the maledictions of the whole world, you shall learn the greatness of my love. It is now that the consecrated Virgin of the Desert will kindle the brands as your Beloved and the torches as your Wife. Yes, I swear it before the great Initiate, before the wise Hierophant in the Temple of the Unknown God, face to face with the Sphinxes of the Eternal Mystery ... whose veils are beginning to part.¹²⁸

Heraklidos blesses the couple, urging them to preserve their faith intact and urges them to ‘love on with a love stronger than death’, hailing them as the ‘Betrothed of Exile, rise now as Spouses of Eternity’. Before departing he reminds them of the message received from the Voice: ‘If you wish the seed of your life to yield a human harvest, if you wish the city of your dreams to come forth from your example, you must light a holocaust ...’.¹²⁹ In the original French, Schuré uses this term *holocauste* to refer to the historical use of the term (from Latin *holocaustum*) to describe a burnt offering in ancient rituals, or a sacrificial offering completely consumed by fire. As will be seen, this will be an important motif in Delville’s *L’Amour des Âmes*.

In the final scene, Cléonice realises that their destiny through Love and sacrifice can be consummated only in death. She exclaims: ‘The voice of the highest Love is the voice of God, the cry of the Soul towards the Infinite, and the reply of the Infinite within the Soul. Just now I

¹²⁶ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 121.

¹²⁷ Beresford Kemmis gave a brief synopsis of the relationship between Schuré and Steiner in the note preceding the 1935 English translation of *Les enfants de Lucifer* (p. 6): ‘In 1906 ... [Schuré] ... first met Rudolf Steiner and a close friendship ensued. In 1909, a translation into German by Fraulein von Sivers, later Frau Marie Steiner, was produced as a Play at Munich by Rudolf Steiner, and formed a prelude to his Course of Lectures *Occident and Orient, or the Children of Lucifer and the Brethren of Christ*. These lectures are translated into English and published by Messrs. Putnams under the title of *The East in the Light of the West* ... This Play served also as an introduction to Rudolf Steiner’s own Mystery Plays which he initiated at Munich the following year and which are now given at Dornach, Switzerland, in the stupendous Goetheanum erected by him for the purpose’.

¹²⁸ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 125.

¹²⁹ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 126.

called upon God, He has answered me with the ultimate certainty. He said to me: ‘There is no truth but in love and in death!’ She then exclaims ecstatically: ‘Like the fumes of the sacrifice, our *resurgent souls* will ascend to heaven on the *flames of the holocaust* ... We shall *vibrate through infinite space*, and by the sacrifice our task will be fulfilled on earth ... Do you not feel that death can only unite us more ardently’.¹³⁰ Phosphoros hesitates, exclaiming: ‘Whither will you lead me, terrible prophetess, my bride in marriage and in death?’ To which Cléonice replies, ‘Into my own kingdom ... where there is neither obstacle nor barrier nor bounds ... where free at last *we shall mingle our souls like two meteors in a starry sky!*’¹³¹ Phosphoros is finally convinced that death is their true liberation and that their sacrifice will be their ultimate transfiguration. He exclaims:

Yes, then, let us die together, but let us die gladly, like true children of Lucifer! The world means to crush us? Let us liberate ourselves. It means to part us? Let us unite for ever. Death is pursuing us. Let us go to meet him. God demands a holocaust? Let us offer to him proudly, like a festival, the flower of our two lives and the heroic dream of our souls! Let us pass through the Night of Death towards a nobler day!¹³²

They drink poison from two chalices provided by Heraklidos, and as she dies Cléonice sees the ultimate vision of the ‘sign of fulfilment’, the Cross superimposed on the Star: ‘Ah! This journey from world to world ... with you! ... I see ... I see the Cross of Christ shining through the Star of my Lucifer!’¹³³

In looking upon the bodies, Heraklidos declares, ‘They are victorious! For they have loved and struggled to the end. Blessed are those who have believed in their dream: they will possess it ... their high love will shine out upon mankind like a torch of the free city’.¹³⁴ Finally, he admonishes the Bishop who wants to destroy the bodies to ‘Take care! Keep your profane hands from those bodies sanctified by the holocaust of Love! Beware of touching my sceptre with your crozier. This Temple is not one of those which you can shake ... Beware of the God whom you know not!’¹³⁵

As he says this, a flaming Star appears above the lovers with a fiery Cross gleaming at its centre. The play closes with the final explanation by Heraklidos of the miraculous manifestation:

That is the Sign of the Times to come—the Cross of Christ upon the Star of Lucifer! How it burns, the fiery Cross at the core of the flaming Star! Thus these two transfigured souls are fused into flame in the infinite. By their sacrifice, Heroic Love has regained divine Wisdom; the Rebel Angel has found again his lost Star. And now, Bishop, in the name of the Almighty who has manifested Himself here, take up your crozier and go tell your people what you have seen in the Temple of Truth ... True heroes will come here to

¹³⁰ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 129, emphasis added.

¹³¹ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 129, emphasis added.

¹³² Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 129, emphasis added.

¹³³ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 131.

¹³⁴ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 131–132.

¹³⁵ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 132.

kindle their torches, for from the children of Lucifer has come forth an inextinguishable flame!¹³⁶

This final dramatic scene was read by Schuré to the audience at the *Salon de la Libre Esthétique* during his lecture in Brussels in March 1899¹³⁷ and would have certainly inspired Delville to create a visual formulation of its message,¹³⁸ resulting in one of his central masterpieces of the time, *L'Amour des Âmes*.¹³⁹ The work was first exhibited at the *Salon de la Libre Esthétique* in March 1900—which suggests that Delville conceived the idea for this work, and began working on it not long after first meeting Édouard Schuré the previous year.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 132. It is interesting to note that Rudolf Steiner, impressed with Schuré's play, developed a series of lectures on the themes raised by Schuré. The lectures were later published by Steiner in his book *The East in the Light of the West* (London: Putman and Sons, 1922) that included the following notable passage regarding the central image of the Cross and the Star of Lucifer (pp. 3–4): 'The Cross alone gives vital courage and belief to our right understanding; but the star of the light-bearer, the star of Lucifer, if we surrender ourselves to it, can enlighten us upon the spiritual ideas within us. That is the other centre of force on which we must take a firm stand; we must be capable of acquiring knowledge which goes into the depths of life, which goes behind the outer, material appearances, which sends its rays from the place where there is light, even when to human eyes and understanding all is dark. It was necessary for the progress of humanity that darkness should reign for a time; as indicated in a profound way in the Gospel of St. John. This darkness was illumined by what we call the Christ principle, the Christ'.

¹³⁷ As noted by De Tallenay 'Le Théâtre du Rêve', 106–107.

¹³⁸ The discussion that follows is based on the visual evidence of Delville's painting in relation to the texts analysed here. Little documentary evidence survives in the Delville archives regarding this painting (letters or notes by the author), and, curiously, Delville barely mentions it in his autobiographical notes, apart from a cursory listing of the works in his *œuvre*.

¹³⁹ I have given a detailed discussion and analysis of this painting in my book on Delville. However, that discussion did not include an analysis of the work in terms of Schuré's play, but did cover the initiatory themes of the work in relation to Delville's art of the time. The discussion there included an exegesis of the theme of Love in relation to aspects of Delville's occult and aesthetic theories about which he published during the 1890s. This included the theme of the metaphysical aspects of the nude and the spiritual notion of unity as it relates to the theme of the androgyne. See Cole. *Jean Delville*, 293–304.

¹⁴⁰ Delville's participation was briefly mentioned in *L'Art Moderne* soon after the exhibition opening. See Octave Maus, 'Le Salon de la Libre Esthétique', *L'Art Moderne* 9 (4 March 1900), 65–66. Maus made passing reference to Delville's 'symbolisme abstrait' in the review. Delville's *L'Amour des Ames* was later exhibited at the *Exposition universelle* in Paris in 1900, where it won a silver medal. The award was listed in *L'Art Moderne* in July 1900. See Anon., 'Le Jury des Récompenses à l'Exposition universelle de Paris', *L'Art Moderne* 28 (15 July 1900), 223. For medal winners, see also Anon., 'Les Récompenses de l'Exposition', *Le Figaro* (16 August 1900), 5. The Belgian section of the exhibition was reviewed in *Le Figaro*, which mentioned Delville in passing: 'M. Delville is haunted by the Lombardy school'. See Arsène Alexandre, 'Les Beaux-Arts à l'Exposition', *Le Figaro* (9 September 1900), 5. Overall, the work was largely overlooked in the Belgian press while it was on show either in Brussels or in Paris, and

Delville pared down the narrative of this important work by representing two full-length nude figures placed centrally and set against a celestial background scattered with stars and planets, representing a metaphysical firmament, the world of the 'Ideal'. The figures' eyes are closed (as though dead), with calm and somewhat blissful facial expressions, their heads leaning in opposite directions against their respective shoulders. Their arms are outstretched to either side with hands held together, their fingers delicately intertwined. Fluidic forces of energetic astral light (identical to those seen in *L'Homme-Dieu*) upon which the figures are borne aloft, swirl from the darkness below, splitting in two streams on either side of the figures and uniting in an aureole of incandescent golden flames radiating above their heads. These celestial flames appear to emanate from a white-hot centre from which delicate rays emerge.¹⁴¹ Delville symbolised the union of the two exquisitely delineated figures in the symmetrically opposite curve of their bodies as well as in their hands with interlaced fingers; opposite but manifestly united as one. The key to this work is in the title: the 'Love of Souls' which, it can be strongly argued, relates to the main theme of Schuré's play: the love of Phosphoros and Cléonice through which they are united in death. Schuré emphasised that his characters were personifications of the ideal man and woman (as noted earlier) representing opposing poles¹⁴²—personified as an

Delville's participation was mostly mentioned in passing. However, a drawing by Louis Moreels of Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes* was reproduced in *La Réforme* in March 1900. See Jules du Jardin, 'Le Salon de la Libre Esthétique', *La Réforme* (25 March 1900), 3. Surveying the Exhibition in Paris, Paul Méran noted of Delville's (misnamed) painting: 'Another painting of the Idea. Jean Delville associates harmonious forms to express l'*Union des âmes* ... The decorative and ephemeral nature of this tempera painting can hardly be reproached for being conventional, for a work which, by design, rejects reality. Two young bodies rendered in beautiful lines, like the chaste purity of a flower, form the stem of a large flower, a flower of dreams formed through entwined arms and flaming tresses, floating within a great blue flame'. Paul Méran, 'Lettre Parisienne. La Belgique au Palais des Beaux Arts à Paris', *La Réforme* (17 June 1900), 3.

¹⁴¹ The fluidic bands surrounding the figures may be interpreted as a representation of 'Astral Light' the fluidic matrix underlying the visible and invisible worlds: 'It is the very element of the Invisible; it is the universal matrix in which humanity is immersed like a vast embryo, and in which human incarnations are created and to which they return. It gives rhythm to the movement of all vitality through the vibrations of its creative force; it lies latent in the ether and radiates around absorbing centres; dispersed throughout the stars, animals, men, plants, and metals, it is this *universal light* that produces all phenomena. It is the great domain of *secondary causes*, the kingdom of the occult world. Astral light surrounds and penetrates the entire corporeality of the universe and is itself saturated with souls which it perpetually engenders for the generation of beings... The exploration of this mysterious cosmic force constitutes one of the most extraordinary works of practical Magic... when man, by means of the ordeals of initiation, has succeeded in penetrating the occult regions of *astral light*, he is initiated; he then knows the secrets of Life and of Death ...'. Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 45–46.

¹⁴² See the brief resumé in *L'Art Moderne* noting the theme of the forthcoming lecture by Schuré's: 'We shall speak next Sunday of the beautiful and remarkable lecture given by M. Édouard Schuré at the Libre Esthétique. The drama, fragments of which he read to us and which belongs to the "theatre of dream", is a most harmonious symbolisation of the present struggle and of the possible future fusion of the two principles of beauty and charity, of paganism and

expression of Hellenism (paganism) and Christianity (love and intelligence)—whose fusion is possible through the ‘miracle of Love’. In other words, according to Schuré, the force that unites them is ‘Complete, absolute Love, at once human and divine, passionate and spiritual, is the fecundating Love, the saving and creative Love’,¹⁴³ thus forming a complete androgynous being:¹⁴⁴ ‘Each gives themselves to the other, and each is resurrected in the other, *so that they form a single being whose magnetic poles multiply their power a hundredfold*’.¹⁴⁵ This union through love is realised most vividly in their sacrificial death. The lines spoken by Cléonice before dying most vividly evoke the scene depicted by Delville where she describes the union of their souls as they ascend (‘vibrate’) through infinite space towards the flames of the sacrificial fire (Schuré’s ‘*holocauste*’) tangibly evoked at the top of the work: ‘Like the fumes of the sacrifice, our *resurgent souls* will ascend to heaven on the *flames of the holocaust* ... We shall *vibrate through infinite space*, and by the sacrifice our task will be fulfilled on earth ... Do you not feel that death can only unite us more ardently’.¹⁴⁶ The setting of Delville’s painting and the union of the two figures surging upwards—propelled, as it were, by the astral energies represented in the blue currents—through the cosmic, celestial dimension—is even more literally evoked in the lines spoken by Cléonice where she exclaims that they will be free after death and ascend, ‘where there is neither obstacle nor barrier nor bounds ... where free at last *we shall mingle our souls like two meteors in a starry sky!*’¹⁴⁷ The final detail that is interesting to note is the arrangement of the figures with arms outstretched that forms a crucifix—it is likely that this is a deliberate reference to the Christian cross that appeared at the apotheosis of Schuré’s *Children of Lucifer*.

It is fitting that Delville announced his conversion to Theosophy in his *L’Amour des Âmes* in 1900 with a powerful poetic visual evocation of a scene that articulates themes of Love, death, and transcendence and the union of opposites—of which he wrote extensively in his earlier esoteric text *Dialogue entre Nous*. Many themes in the play are echoed not only in Delville’s painting but also in this seminal hermetic text published by Delville five years earlier.¹⁴⁸ Bearing in mind that Schuré constructed his main protagonists as symbols representing opposing forces that are united in harmony through Love, we see in Delville’s work a detailed expression of this hermetic principle. In his *Dialogue entre Nous*, Delville outlines how the forces of opposition are drawn together through ‘magnetic movements’, resulting in a unity through Love—which is a dynamic, universal force that underlies harmony and unity:

Christianity, of intellect and love—principles whose conflict we witness all around us; and the poet-writer found admirable words with which to depict and render tangible these most vivid abstractions’. Anon., ‘Petite Chronique’, *L’Art Moderne* 12 (19 March 1899), 94.

¹⁴³ Schuré, *Les enfants de Lucifer*, xvi–xvii.

¹⁴⁴ See Cole, *Jean Delville*, 302ff. for a detailed discussion of this aspect of the painting as well as the important theme of androgyny in Delville’s work generally.

¹⁴⁵ Schuré, *Les enfants de Lucifer*, xvii, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁶ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 129, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁷ Schuré, *Children of Lucifer*, 129, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁸ Given the earlier discussion of Delville’s criticism of the Church, it is not hard to realise that Delville would also have been attracted to Schuré’s critique of institutional religion as a corrupt force standing in opposition of true spiritual freedom and enlightenment expressed in *Les enfants de Lucifer*.

Like universes, beings are magnetised and emit, both spiritually and dynamically, fluids. Each being, like each celestial body, radiates a fluidic force proportional to its constitution, its identity, which explains attractions and repulsions, magnetic movements without which the great law of the analogy of opposites would be impossible. Chemical affinities or spiritual impulses, all are summed up in magnetic attraction, of which Love is the *raison d'être*. What we call love, harmony, is nothing other than two divergences coalescing toward unity. Love can be defined psychologically as the complementary attraction in the union of two beings, and when this is lacking, their separation is always imminent. The phenomena revealed by magnetism are the effects of universal magnetization.¹⁴⁹

And similarly, in echoing much of the thematic motifs in his *L'Amour des Âmes*, he describes the fluidic constitution of space that is composed of vivifying properties. This constitutes the vital principle of the universe that gives life to celestial bodies, and the opposing forces of fire (male) and water (feminine) that generate all reality—the conjunction of which results in Love and Harmony:

The interplanetary space is composed of vivifying properties, chemical and fluidic nourishments of celestial bodies, which constitute the *primum pabulum vitae*, the universal vital principle. It is through these oxygenic and hydrogenic properties of the vast sidereal expanse that stars, comets, aeroliths, bolides, and meteors are ignited; it is through the heterosexuality of the elements—the fire as the masculine principle, the water as the feminine principle—that everything is engendered, for all generation requires two different sexes from which Love arises, that is to say, Harmony. This alchemical conjunction is a natural law that extends its effects across all degrees of the universal creative power.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 74–75.

¹⁵⁰ Delville. *Dialogue entre Nous*, 73.

Delville also discussed in some detail his hermetic understanding of the nature of the soul which, given the theme of this painting, is additionally instructive: ‘The soul is an incarnate spirit, an immortal essence within a mortal form, independent of temporal life. The soul in itself is indefinable to those who are unacquainted with the regions of the beyond, since it is the greatest occult power of our being and, by its very nature, divine. The soul animates substance; it is the rhythm of life, it is thought, it is force. The molecules and atoms that constitute bodies are set in motion by the magnetism of the soul, for it is inadmissible to believe that matter in itself is capable of rhythmic coordination without the conscious intervention of the soul. When man dies—that is to say, when the organism has become immobilised in its harmonic movement and in its vital correspondences—the soul ceases its transitory incarnation and ascends towards spheres impenetrable to carnal eyes, until a new reincarnation in which it will once again develop life. Nothing is annihilated. Everything that dies becomes a thing once more. Every being that dies becomes a being once more. Substances, no more than force or fluid, are never annihilated. That which has been shall be again. The corpse is the end of the organic action of the body, the perishable matter, whereas the active principle is the imperishable soul which has just escaped from its ephemeral envelope, the flesh. Thus, death, in organic terms, is the destruction of the corporeal elements—that is to say, the irremediable impotence of the vital fluid, the coordinating

Finally, it is worth noting that Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes* can be seen as a work that resolves Delville's earlier themes that dealt with the struggle between eroticism and death and the tension between erotic and spiritual love. These themes are particularly evident in his *Tristan and Yseult* (1887, Fig. 22), based on Wagner's eponymous opera.¹⁵¹ Here Delville depicts the Wagnerian lovers expiring in death after drinking from the poisoned chalice. The latter motif echoes Schuré's final scene in *Les enfants de Lucifer*—no doubt inspired by Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*—and therefore drawing most noticeably a thematic connection between Delville's two works. However, the death scene in Schuré's play results in an apotheosis of the mystical lovers, which is articulated in Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes* as an ecstatic and transcendent union of souls that are spiritualised in their celestial realm; this is in direct contrast to the morbid extinction of the erotic lovers catastrophically united in death in *Tristan and Yseult*. It is of interest that Schuré's published essay on Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* included a vividly articulated impression of the death of Wagner's lovers that includes imagery that has resonances in Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes*, which Delville may very well have recalled as an additional source of inspiration when creating his *L'Amour des Âmes*:¹⁵²

Here, sentiment reigns supreme. Eros, the radiant and formidable god, who elsewhere appears only in flashes, has filled this drama with his blazing torch. The tragic or sublime effects of great love had been well depicted, but its essence had not been expressed with such intensity, such persistence of passion. Novelists, moralists, painters, poets, and musicians have described its ecstasies, dangers, vicissitudes, and catastrophes. What had never been rendered to the same degree is this complete blending of two souls, this fusion of two beings under the magic of the subtlest attraction (symbolised by the philtre). So great is their desire for unity that the law of individuality becomes a constraint, separate existence a burden; they find their deliverance only in death. Thus, like two meteors meeting in space, they continue their course with redoubled force and consume themselves in a brilliant flame within the ether.¹⁵³

The Soul and Death

Assuming that Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes* depicts the spiritual ascent and union of two souls after death into a celestial or divine realm, it is instructive to examine Delville's ideas on the soul and death. For Delville, the nature of the soul and the notion of death are interrelated, and he

source of movement'. Delville, *Dialogue Entre Nous*, 13.

¹⁵¹ For a highly detailed discussion of this work, see Cole, *Jean Delville*, 267–292.

¹⁵² Read in context, the coincidence of Delville creating this work very soon after hearing Schuré's lecture on his *Les enfants de Lucifer* with its transcendent finale, as well as Delville's exposure to the spiritual ideas and ideals of Theosophy at the time, makes it more likely that Schuré's Play was the source of the intent behind Delville's *L'Amour des Âmes* rather than Schuré's description of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (which was in any case first published in 1875). It is even more likely, in the context of the idea of Sacrifice (discussed earlier as necessary for progress along the path to Divinity) that this conflation of sources, dealing with spiritual and erotic love, was deliberate on the part of Delville as a form of sacrificial expiation of physical desire for which he so ardently sought in his earlier paintings and poetry.

¹⁵³ Schuré, *Le drame musical* (1908), 155.

subscribed to the esoteric idea that the essence of man is immortal and divine. This essence is characterised by the notion of the soul. Delville follows the esoteric line that death is viewed as a phase change for the soul from the physical to the metaphysical in its constant evolution towards perfection: 'Death is no more an end than birth is a beginning. The being is destined to mortality through its flesh; to immortality through the Soul. No negative argument can withstand this truth, which is the first door opened to the secrets of the visible and the *invisible*'.¹⁵⁴ For Delville, the soul is the divine essence in man, the essence of life itself:

The soul is an incarnated spirit, an *immortal essence* within a *mortal form*, independent of temporal life. The soul in itself is indefinable to those unaware of the realms of the beyond, for it is the greatest occult power of our self, and, by its divine *essence*, is of divine nature. The soul animates substance; it is the rhythm of life, it is *thought*, and it is *force*.¹⁵⁵

The soul, according to Delville, is linked to the physical via a third 'body', namely, the astral body, which mediates between the physical body and the soul. At death, a depolarisation occurs between the soul and the body, on the one hand, and the soul and the astral body, on the other hand. This, for Delville, is part of the evolutionary process of the soul towards the superior spiritual state, and denotes the spiritualisation of life itself:

The moment of death ... is the fulfilment of a mystery wherein a being's destiny continues to evolve, according to the strict, never-interrupted laws of Life, beyond the troubled perspectives of your perception. Death, that formidable function within the infinite realm of supreme metamorphoses where Nature and God both separate and merge for eternal Creation, is the deliverance of a soul that escapes, with felicity, from its dual anatomical and astral prison ... The soul, once freed, leaves behind not only a material corpse on earth, whose desensitization is irreversible, but also another corpse, its second envelope, which it abandons in the universal light, where it eventually dissolves into the astral forces that engendered it to enable the soul's connection with the organism at birth. This second corpse is thus the *astral body*.¹⁵⁶

For Delville, the soul has a spiritual destination after death; in other words, it returns: 'From spheres impenetrable to carnal eyes, until a new reincarnation, where it will unfold life'.¹⁵⁷ This ascent of the soul towards the empyrean realm of the divine is cogently evoked in Delville's celebrated work *L'Amour des Âmes* (1900), which depicts two figures set against a cosmic background of stars and planets, swathed in ribbon-like fluidic currents (possibly a representation of what Delville refers to as 'universal light'), ascending towards a region of incandescent flame. The nature of the evolution of the soul after death from the physical to the

¹⁵⁴ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 12, emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁵ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 13, emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁶ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 21–23, emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁷ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 13: On p. 22 he wrote: 'Divine essence which governs substance, as I have already told you, the soul ascends after death to the divine world, provided, of course, that at that hour it has reached the higher degree of its becoming, which the law of reincarnation assigns to it in eternity'.

divine (and *vice versa* during birth) recapitulates the movement of the Idea through successive phases of ‘involution’ and ‘evolution’. Delville wrote: ‘The Spirit, upon leaving the material form of the earthly body, *evolves* toward a higher state of Life, just as, at the birth of a being, the Spirit undergoes an *involution* into the lower world of elementals, that of Incarnation. The being undergoes successive existences during which it fulfils its Destiny’.¹⁵⁸ The theme of the soul’s spiritual evolution is poignantly expressed in *L’Amour des Âmes* and relates this work thematically, and most directly, to Delville’s *L’Homme-Dieu*, which focuses on the evolution of the soul towards Divinity.

Schuré discussed this cycle of death and rebirth of the soul—to which he referred as the ‘law of incarnation and excarnation’—at length in his *The Great Initiates*, concerning which he wrote:

It constitutes the pivotal node in the evolution of the soul and enables us to trace its path backward and forward into the depths of nature and divinity. For this law reveals the rhythm and measure, the reason and purpose of its immortality. From being abstract or fantastical, it renders the soul living and logical, demonstrating the correspondences between life and death. Earthly birth is a death from the spiritual perspective, and death is a celestial resurrection. The alternation of these two lives is necessary for the development of the soul, and each is both the consequence and the explanation of the other. Whoever has penetrated these truths finds themselves at the heart of the mysteries, at the centre of initiation.¹⁵⁹

For Schuré, the teleological goal of this initiatory cycle is for the soul to conquer matter, and in doing so it will cease to incarnate and will instead enter ‘a complete union with the divine intelligence’. Each incarnation is a stepping stone, which is necessary to allow it to enter this ultimate spiritual condition as ‘It rejoins its archetype in God’.¹⁶⁰ Delville echoed this, stating that ‘The purpose of human life, through acts and works, is Perfection and the Ideal’.¹⁶¹

The above discussion presents an intriguing evidence-based case for the textual inspiration for Delville’s *L’Amour des Âmes* in Édouard Schuré’s Theosophical Play *Les enfants de Lucifer*.¹⁶² The painting was Delville’s foundational artistic statement in his move towards Theosophy that inspired his work at the start of the new century. But it could be argued that thematic elements in the play also served to provide a foundation for the subsequent two works by Delville that defined his Theosophical artistic programme more overtly, namely, his *L’Homme-Dieu* and *Prométhée*. As we have seen, the former invoked many central themes relating to Theosophical notion of the esoteric Christ. The latter, as will be more fully outlined here, has to do with one of the central motifs in Theosophical thought, namely, the figure of the light-bearer, Lucifer. Schuré’s play highlights a significant relationship between Lucifer and Christ in theosophical thought through the climactic symbol at the end of *Les enfants de Lucifer*, namely, the juxtaposition of the Luciferian Star and the Christian Cross. It will be argued here

¹⁵⁸ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 23, emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁹ Schuré, *Les grands initiés* (1895), 359.

¹⁶⁰ Schuré, *Les Grands Initiés*, 365.

¹⁶¹ Delville, *Dialogue entre Nous*, 31.

¹⁶² Unfortunately, there are no surviving letters or documents by Delville where he discusses this work, and it is further curious that it is barely mentioned in his autobiographies or by contemporaries who wrote about his work.

that Delville had in mind to give visual expression to this relationship in developing, almost simultaneously, these two Theosophical programmatic masterworks (his *Prométhée* and *L'Homme-Dieu* respectively) during the first decade of the new century. Prometheus and Lucifer share similar, if not identical, attributes as light-bearers in Theosophical thought. That Delville's *Prométhée* bears aloft the Luciferian five-pointed star invoked in Schuré's Play is significant in this regard and warrants closer examination.

The Star and the Cross—The Theosophical foundation for *Prométhée*/Lucifer and the Christ of *L'Homme-Dieu*

The Light-bearer, a figure symbolising spiritual consciousness and enlightenment, was a central motif in Theosophical thought during Delville's era and was personified in the figures of Lucifer and Prometheus. In Schuré's play, Théoklès is, as we recall, initiated into the mysterious figure of Lucifer, the light-bearer. As indicated earlier, Lucifer, for the Theosophists, is not equivalent to Satan and is, in fact, a complementary figure to Christ. Theosophists held to the belief that Lucifer is a positive force, akin to Prometheus or Dionysus, symbolising the spark of divine consciousness in humanity. In Schuré's theosophical view, Lucifer is a spirit of light that inspires individuality and creativity, guiding humanity toward self-awareness, enlightenment, creativity, thought, and individuality, and a necessary force promoting spiritual evolution. Schuré noted in his introduction:

Lucifer, the genius of Science, Freedom, and Human Individuality, is the relentless adversary of the Church in its current form, but he is not the adversary of Christ, though he evolves in an opposite direction; he is His complement. For there is a point where the man who seeks to become divine meets the divine made man, and that is the very point where Science becomes Wisdom by merging with Love.¹⁶³

Lucifer is closely related to Prometheus in esoteric Theosophy. This was often discussed in the writings of the founder of the Theosophy movement, Helena Blavatsky, who reinterpreted the Greek myth of Prometheus as an esoteric figure that brought the 'fire' of spiritual consciousness to humanity. Tracing the origins of the Promethean myth in ancient India, she noted that Prometheus 'belongs to that race of Titans who had rebelled against the gods ... The Titan is more than a thief of the celestial fire. He is the representation of humanity—active, industrious, intelligent, but at the same time ambitious, which aims at equalling divine powers'.¹⁶⁴ In a later interpretation Blavatsky described Prometheus as:

The Greek *logos*; he who by bringing on earth divine fire (intelligence and consciousness) endowed men with reason and mind. Prometheus is the Hellenic type of our Kumaras or Egos, those who, by incarnating in men, made of them latent gods instead of animals. The gods (or Elohim) were averse to men becoming 'as one of us' (Genesis iii., 22), and knowing 'good and evil'. Hence we see these gods in every religious legend punishing man for his desire to know. As the Greek myth has it, for

¹⁶³ Schuré, *Les enfants de Lucifer*, xvii.

¹⁶⁴ Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine. Volume II: Anthropogenesis* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1888), 525.

stealing the fire he brought to men from Heaven, Prometheus was chained by the order of Zeus to a crag of the Caucasian Mountains.¹⁶⁵

Moreover, as an expression of the ‘Logos’ or ‘manifested deity’,¹⁶⁶ Prometheus would be seen as one of the spiritual avatars and, as such, directly related to the *Christian Logos*, i.e., Christ (John 1:1)¹⁶⁷—an association that might well have been understood by Delville when creating his *Prométhée* and *L’Homme-Dieu*. As a bearer of the light of divine consciousness, Prometheus relates to Lucifer in esoteric Theosophy. Blavatsky recalled the parallel between the two figures: ‘The allegory of the Fall of man and the fire of Prometheus is also another version of the myth of the rebellion of the proud Lucifer, hurled down to the bottomless pit’.¹⁶⁸ For Blavatsky, the parallel is maintained in as far as Lucifer, personifying enlightenment and

¹⁶⁵ Helena Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary* (Krotona: Theosophical Publishing House, 1892; repr. 1918–1901), 245, emphasis in original. Elsewhere she wrote: The Adam Primus, or Kadmon, the Logos of the Jewish mystics, is the same as the Grecian Prometheus, who seeks to rival with the divine wisdom; he is also the Pimander of Hermes, or the POWER OF THE THOUGHT DIVINE, in its most spiritual aspect, for he was less hypostasised by the Egyptians than the two former. These all create men, but fail in their final object. Desiring to endow man with an immortal spirit, in order that by linking the trinity in one, he might gradually return to his primal spiritual state without losing his individuality, Prometheus fails in his attempt to steal the divine fire, and is sentenced to expiate his crime on Mount Kazbeck. Prometheus is also the Logos of the ancient Greeks, as well as Herakles’. Helena Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, vol. 1, *Science* (London: Bernard Quaritch: 1901), 298.

¹⁶⁶ Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary*, 177. Blavatsky wrote of the Logos: ‘The *manifested* deity with every nation and people; the outward expression, or the effect of the cause which is ever concealed. Thus, speech is the Logos of thought; hence it is aptly translated by the “Verbum” and “Word” in its metaphysical sense’.

¹⁶⁷ Blavatsky wrote: ‘... it was Herakles again who liberated Prometheus (the Adam of the pagans), by putting an end to the torture inflicted on him for his transgressions, by descending to the Hades, and going round the Tartarus. Like Christ he appeared as a substitute for the pangs of humanity, by offering himself in a self-sacrifice on a funereal-burning pile’. Helena Blavatsky. *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, vol. 2, *Theology* (London: Bernard Quaritch: 1901), 515.

¹⁶⁸ Blavatsky. *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 1, *Science*, 299. Elsewhere the author elaborated: ‘The allegory of the fire of Prometheus is another version of the rebellion of the proud Lucifer, *who was hurled down to the bottomless pit*, or simply unto our Earth, to live as man. The Hindu Lucifer, the *Mahasura*, is also said to have become envious of the Creator’s resplendent light, and, at the head of inferior Asuras (not gods, but spirits), to have rebelled against Brahma; for which Siva hurled him down to Patala. But, as philosophy goes hand in hand with allegorical fiction in Hindu myths, the *devil* is made to repent, and is afforded the opportunity to progress; he is a sinful man *esoterically*, and can by *yoga* devotion, and adeptship, reach his status of *one with the deity*, once more. Hercules, the Sun-god, descends to Hades (the cave of Initiation) to deliver the victims from their tortures, etc., etc. The Christian Church alone creates *eternal* torment for the devil and the damned, that she has invented’. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 2, *Theology*, 237, emphasis in original.

intellectual freedom, is also another manifestation of the *Logos*: ‘... thus Lucifer, the spirit of Intellectual Enlightenment and Freedom of Thought, is metaphorically the guiding beacon, which helps man to find his way through the rocks and sandbanks of Life, for Lucifer is the Logos in his highest ... aspect’.¹⁶⁹

Lucifer was chosen as the name of the main periodical of the Theosophical Society which was first issued in 1887; with a detailed introduction by Blavatsky on the choice of the name. Blavatsky realised that the potential controversy and the name would be ‘equivocal to orthodox Christian ears’¹⁷⁰ given the normative association of Lucifer with Satan; but she was at pains to point out this erroneous misunderstanding from the perspective of esoteric Theosophy.¹⁷¹ For Blavatsky, Lucifer is the ‘light bringer’—‘translated from Latin Lucifer—meaning no worse than “light-bringer” directly translated from the Latin: from *lux*, *lucis*, “light” and *ferre* “to bring”’.¹⁷² For the Theosophists then, Lucifer is ‘the divine spirit that sacrificed itself for humanity ... Lucifer ... is the Morning Star—the Light-bearer’.¹⁷³ Referring to *Revelation* (22:16), Blavatsky raised the notion, indicated earlier, that Lucifer is the complement of Christ; both of whom stand in opposition to Satan:

But their sacred writ is the first to contradict their interpretations and the association of Lucifer, the Morning Star, with Satan. Chapter XXII. of *Revelations*, verse 16th, says: ‘I, Jesus am the root ... and the bright and *Morning Star*’ ([Greek] ‘early rising’): hence Eosphoros, or the Latin Lucifer. The opprobrium attached to this name is of such a very late date, that the Roman Church found itself forced to screen the theological slander behind a two-sided interpretation—as usual. Christ, we are told, is the ‘Morning Star’, the *divine* Lucifer; and Satan the *usurpator* of the *Verbum*, the ‘infernal Lucifer’ ... ‘The great Archangel Michael, the conqueror of Satan, is identical in paganism with Mercury-Mithra, to whom, after defending the Sun (symbolical of God) from the attacks of Venus-Lucifer, was given the possession of this planet, *et datus est ei locus Luciferi*’.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 2, *Theology*, 162.

¹⁷⁰ Blavatsky, ‘What’s in a Name? Why The Magazine is Called “Lucifer”’, *Lucifer* 1:1 (September 15, 1887), 1.

¹⁷¹ In an attempt to explain the Christian aversion to Lucifer, Blavatsky noted: ‘Piously inclined readers may argue that “Lucifer” is accepted by all the churches as one of the many names of the Devil. According to Milton’s superb fiction, Lucifer is Satan, the “rebellious” angel, the enemy of God and man. If one analyses his rebellion, however, it will be found of no worse nature than an assertion of free-will and independent thought, as if Lucifer had been born in the XIXth century. This epithet of “rebellious”, is a theological calumny, on a par with that other slander of God by the Predestinarians, one that makes of deity an “Almighty” fiend worse than the “rebellious” Spirit himself; “an omnipotent Devil desiring to be ‘complimented’ as all merciful when he is exerting the most fiendish cruelty”, as put by J. Cotter Morison. Both the foreordaining and predestining fiend-God, and his subordinate agent are of human invention; they are two of the most morally repulsive and horrible theological dogmas that the nightmares of light-hating monks have ever evolved out of their unclean fancies’. Blavatsky, ‘What’s in a Name’, 2. See also Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 2, *Theology*, 31–33.

¹⁷² Blavatsky, ‘What’s in a Name?’, 2.

¹⁷³ Blavatsky, ‘What’s in a Name?’, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Blavatsky, ‘What’s in a Name?’, 6.

In his later study *L'Évolution divine: du sphinx au Christ*, Schuré would develop further his ideas on the relationship between Lucifer and Christ that were implicit in his *Les enfants de Lucifer*, uniting the complementary human impulses between, on the one hand, the Luciferian desire towards knowledge and individual freedom and, on the other hand, the Christological urge towards love and sacrifice—two impulses essential along the path towards spiritual evolution. This was symbolised, it will be remembered, in the manifestation of the ‘sign of fulfilment’ at the end of his play in the image of the Star and the Cross:

Lucifer is not Satan, the Genius of Evil, as portrayed by orthodox and popular tradition. Lucifer is an Elohim like the others, and his very name, meaning ‘Bearer of Light’, guarantees his indestructible dignity as an Archangel. We shall see later why Lucifer, the Genius of Knowledge and Free Individuality, was as necessary to the world as Christ, the Genius of Love and Sacrifice; how all of human evolution arises from their struggle; and how, ultimately, their final and transcendent harmony must crown humanity’s return to divinity.¹⁷⁵

Delville later directly invoked the pairing of Christ and a torch-bearing Prometheus/Lucifer (see above) in his major post-Great War work, *Les Forces* (**Fig. 11**), where the pair leads a seraphic army of light resisting the forces of darkness.

That Delville conceived his ‘Luciferian’ *Prométhée* and his esoteric Christ figure in *L’Homme-Dieu* almost immediately after encountering Schuré’s ideas seems to suggest that these works are an attempt to reflect this new philosophical direction towards the Theosophical notion of the divinity of mankind. It remains, finally, to examine more closely Delville’s *Prométhée* and its unique symbolism of the five-pointed star encountered in Schuré’s play that distinguishes this work from traditional representations of the mythical Prometheus.

¹⁷⁵ Édouard Schuré, *L'évolution divine: du sphinx au Christ* (Paris: Perrin et Cie: 1912), 36. On pp. 438–439, Schuré reinforced this relationship through the allegorical connection between Lucifer and Christ derived from a legend told by the Rosicrucians: ‘The earliest initiates of the Holy Grail recounted a profound legend concerning Lucifer. The Rosicrucians later took up this symbol and gave it its full significance. In his fall from the spheres of uncreated light into the dark circle of the earth, the rebel Archangel lost a precious stone that shone like a star in his crown. It was from this precious stone that the cup was fashioned in which Joseph of Arimathea collected the blood of Christ. Thus, the human soul—which received from Lucifer its ego together with the unquenchable thirst for ever-growing individuality—will, drop by drop, fill itself with the divine Love that comes from Christ. When he has fully understood the meaning of his sacrifice and accomplished its mission, the Archangel Lucifer, liberated and more radiant than ever, will become the god of the planet Venus, which was originally destined for him and for which he still feels a consuming nostalgia. At that moment, Christ will be completely identified with the earth and with humanity. The black cross, sign of sin, expiation, and death, will have become the white cross, the cross of light, the resplendent sign of the Resurrection, from which fall the roses of eternal Love—living roses, fragrant as the mouths of angels’.

Prométhée and the Star of Initiation

Delville first exhibited his *Prométhée* at the *Salon Triennal de Bruxelles* in August of 1907 (see above). The narrative of the image centres on the imposing, physically powerful figure of Prometheus striding across a vast celestial expanse. Below him stretches a seemingly endless multitude of diminutive figures emerging from the clouds with arms outstretched, reaching imploringly towards the towering figure above. The background is a vivid articulation of an otherworldly setting with a dramatic broodingly coloured skyscape scattered with stars and planets. The Promethean figure bears aloft a bright five-pointed star, its brilliance dispelling the dark, ominous clouds above, casting shafts of light in every direction. The upper body of Delville's Prometheus is enveloped in flame-like, petal-shaped tongues of fire, as is the star itself: a reference no doubt to the original myth of the Promethean fire, stolen from the gods, for which he was originally punished. Delville's Titan dominates the foreground and is rendered almost entirely in silhouette, setting up a distinct contrast with the bright luminous background. This *repoussoir* effect enhances the sense of depth beyond, suggesting an infinite expanse stretching into the distance. The Titan's powerful physique is modelled in *chiaroscuro*, with strong contrasts of light and shade further enhancing his athletic musculature and thus creating the impression of a figure of indomitable strength and power. This physical grandeur, coupled with his colossal scale, contrasts perhaps intentionally with the sense of fragility and vulnerability of the mass of figures below over which the towering Titan effortlessly strides. Bathed in a soft, bluish glow from beyond, the mass of humanity appears almost ethereal, as if their unformed spiritual essence awaits fulfilment through the star Prometheus bears. Their vulnerable nature is further emphasised through the articulation of the setting and background that is strewn with stars and planets, some of which emerge through the break in the clouds above, or even among the figures themselves enhancing their fragile, diminutive nature.

Delville established several visual parallels between his *Prométhée* and *L'Homme-Dieu* in order to establish a thematic connection between the two works: The beseeching human figures below, in Delville's *Prométhée*, with their upstretched arms, immediately connect the narrative of this work to his *L'Homme-Dieu*, where the upper group of figures in that work are represented with the same yearning gesture of praise; seeking salvation from the transfigurative figures above them. The transcendent nature of both central figures is further emphasised in their placement in an otherworldly celestial setting, where they are surrounded by clouds that are dispelled as a result of their radiance revealing a transcendent luminescent world beyond. Delville also established a connection between the two principal figures by rendering the facial features and hair of his *Prométhée* with similarly Asiatic characteristics observed in his *L'Homme-Dieu*. Moreover, the figure of Christ in *L'Homme-Dieu*, with its luminous, radiant body of golden light, and the flaming Promethean figure, bearing aloft a radiant star, further connects these works, where the central protagonist is, literally and figuratively, a bringer or bearer of light. They are, hence, in fact both Light-bearers. Delville thus linked his Christ and Prometheus, suggesting—based on the preceding discussion—that they are figures of redemption and symbolise spiritual emancipation and enlightenment; awakening the divine within the multitude drawn to them through the light of spiritual consciousness they bear.¹⁷⁶

Delville's *Prométhée* elicited mixed reviews in the contemporary Belgian press, with opinions often divided along conservative and liberal, or progressive, lines. The critic of the

¹⁷⁶ See also Olivier Delville, *Jean Delville Peintre 1867–1953* (Paris: Editions Laconté, 1984), 76.

conservative *Journal de Bruxelles* provided a sympathetic and thoughtful description of the painting, articulating a clear appreciation of Delville's intended message, writing:

The hero, somewhat of a demiurge, seizes the fire in the sublime form of a glowing five-pointed star, before which his radiant forehead bows. The curls of his very heavy hair blend with the clouds; this forehead mimics the orbit of the planets that the divine flame will awaken, and whose formidable curves populate a space in which life, yearning for the soul, implores through countless arms outstretched toward the distant star. A sublime poem of incessant creation.¹⁷⁷

In direct contrast, however, the well-known progressive writer and art critic Sander Pierron, writing for the centre-left liberal newspaper *L'Indépendance Belge*, provided an excoriating review of Delville's creation, dismissing it as an ambitious work 'whose effort is enormous and the result modest'. His literal reading of Delville's Promethean figure caused him to remark that it had nothing of the mythical hero, with chalky flesh that looked flayed, set in a background that he described as 'a whole excess of cold, cloying shades, lacking delicacy and strength'. He described the star as pale and empty, lacking in elegance of design and richness of colour and interpreted in 'such an obscure and lifeless manner'. Showing a strident antipathy towards Delville's Idealist interpretation of the theme, he hammered home his distaste for the work: 'When will Jean Delville free himself from his extra-philosophical ideology, which is gradually eliminating, one by one, the simple but true plastic qualities that marked so many of his beautiful, untormented drawings of the past?'¹⁷⁸

The five-pointed star borne aloft by Delville's Prometheus was, as we have seen, a central emblem of Schuré's play *Les enfants de Lucifer*, where the star was directly connected to the initiatory figure of Lucifer. Théoklès encounters Lucifer in the initiatory Temple of the Unknown God, who proclaims:

When God said: Let there be light! I was born, radiant and proud, of the breath of His mouth. A star gleamed on my forehead. Soaring through space I cried: 'I am Intelligence and Liberty, I am Light! I will not obey Thee. It is through myself that I mean to be, to know and to conquer'—'Seek, then, Lucifer, through Pain and through Death!' said the Eternal. Then I came near to the heart of the Almighty to steal His fire. Stricken by its splendour, I fell, I the Star of the Archangels, dragging down with me a shower of suns and of demons. I fell into the Abyss upon an accursed planet and the Star on my brow has faded. Since that day I have ranged through space with this torch kindled at the tabernacle of the Eternal, and slowly I am recapturing His universe. Wouldst thou rather enjoy without effort the uncreated Light or attain it with me through Pain and Death?¹⁷⁹

Reference to the initiatory Star is encountered in the writings of Blavatsky, who also referred to this star as the 'five-pointed star of Lucifer'.¹⁸⁰ Thus, from the foregoing discussion it can be

¹⁷⁷ Anon., 'Arts, Sciences et Lettres', 3.

¹⁷⁸ Sander Pierron, 'Au Salon Triennal', *L'Indépendance Belge* (02 September 1907), 4.

¹⁷⁹ Schuré, *The Children of Lucifer*, 51.

¹⁸⁰ Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 2, *Theology*, 448. Blavatsky noted further (*ibid.*) that 'This star of Lucifer is the same one that John sees falling down to earth in his *Apocalypse*'.

determined that Delville's inclusion of the enigmatic five-pointed star links his initiatory Promethean figure to the figure of Lucifer in the context of esoteric Theosophy—as defined by Schuré and Blavatsky. In other words, one can conclude that Delville's Prometheus is not only a light-bearer—literally bearing the bright light of the star above his head—but is also bearing—through the metonymic associations of the Luciferian star, discussed above—the light of individual freedom, divine consciousness, spiritual intelligence, and liberation, self-awareness, enlightenment, and creativity. Delville later wrote that his *Prométhée* was deliberately conceived to express an esoteric message: 'My conception of Prometheus is entirely different from all known portrayals of Prometheus. I have endowed this figure with its true esoteric meaning. It is not physical fire that he brings to humanity, but the fire of intelligence, symbolised by the five-pointed star'.¹⁸¹ In the context of contemporary Theosophy, the painting can also, therefore, be interpreted as Delville's statement of his recent conversion to that movement that engendered the attributes of the five-pointed star outlined in the work of Blavatsky and Schuré. However, it can also be interpreted as an expression of Delville's artistic quest itself—to enlighten society spiritually through his art. In other words, the painting could be interpreted as a metaphysical self-portrait of the artist bearing the light of spiritual enlightenment to the masses through a personal artistic mission—a notion that is certainly supported through his numerous publications on that exact goal, from his *Mission de l'Art* onwards. It might be no coincidence that the features of Delville's *Prométhée* are very close to those of a self-portrait of the artist in profile drawn in 1904 (**Fig. 23**). Finally, it could be observed that Delville's *Mission* was evidently against the Belgian Establishment, both in terms of the popular *avant-garde* in art as well as the Church, against which both his paintings would have stood as somewhat heretical. If one of the key features of Prometheus/Lucifer was rebellion, then this very publicly enacted revolt against the *status quo*—to bring divine light into a darkened world—undoubtedly constructs Delville as a Luciferian figure in contemporary culture, much like Schuré's Phosphoros. Delville was unequivocal in his thinking that a stance against a tyrannical orthodoxy was a heretical act, but one that was necessary to bring about individual spiritual emancipation. Heresy is the *sine qua non* of the Luciferian light-bearer. For Delville, it is a divine impulse, seeking an outward expression through an illuminated consciousness:

Heresy is, most often if not always, as has been said, a higher, broader, and more truthful conception of religious sentiment. Heresy is holy, heresy is fecund. Heresy is a divine impulse, for it is the outward manifestation of the inner effort of the Divine seeking to express itself through the vehicle of an increasingly enlightened consciousness. Heresy is, indeed, the affirmation of mystical consciousness in the face of the error of a tyrannical, deceitful orthodoxy.

Heresy, as understood by religious orthodoxies, does not exist. It is an invention of fanaticism, ignorance, and arrogance.¹⁸²

However, there is an additional meaning behind the star motif that connects Delville's *Prométhée* to *L'Homme-Dieu* in the context of his recent contact with to the newer phase of the Theosophical movement promulgated through the writings of Annie Besant. Besant was at the heart of the movement in Theosophy that centred on the idea that there would be an imminent

¹⁸¹ Delville, *Autobiographie*, 14.

¹⁸² Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 275–276.

manifestation of the World Teacher, the *Maitreya* or Christ-Buddha in the flesh. This was formalised in the official movement initiated by Besant in 1911 and centred on the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti.¹⁸³ In her earlier *Esoteric Christianity*, Besant outlined the initiatory path revealed in the mystical concept of Christ that leads to an awakening of the inner Christ consciousness. This symbolic birth, or rebirth, is conceptually related to, and expressed through, the Star of Bethlehem, the Star in the East (or the Star of the Magi), that heralded the birth of Christ. Besant referred to this Star as the ‘Star of Initiation’:

It is significantly said in some of the early Christian writers that Jesus ‘was born in a cave’—the stable of the Gospel narrative; the ‘Cave of Initiation’ is a well-known ancient phrase, and the Initiate is ever born therein; over that cave ‘where the young child’ is burns the ‘Star of Initiation’ the Star that ever shines forth in the East when a Child-Christ is born.¹⁸⁴

Delville wrote of the five-pointed Star as the symbol of initiation that heralds the awareness of the inner birth of divine consciousness: ‘It is evident that those who feel guided, impelled by intuition, have responded to the first signal. As soon as they beheld the heralding sign, the symbol of Initiation, the five-pointed Star of the Magi, they understood, through the virtue of an inner comprehension and a sudden illumination, that their duty was to gather under the aegis of this heralding sign ...’.¹⁸⁵ Delville thus held to the belief that this symbol of initiation would herald the return of the Christ—not only literally in their belief in the imminent return of the Lord Maitreya, the Spiritual Instructor, but also the awakening of the Christ consciousness within:

... the opportunity for humanity to enter ‘*the Kingdom of God*’, as Saint Luke states (XXIII, 24–28). This spiritual Kingdom is none other than the *Path of Initiation*, of which Christ is, in truth, the supreme Initiator. This *Path of Initiation* will be opened anew by Him, through the instructions He will return to impart, enabling humanity to tread the sacred ground where the pure flowers of truth and love blossom. For it is in ‘*the Kingdom of God*’, the Initiation, that the perpetual coming of Christ the Initiator takes place, which, according to the expression of the Brabantine mystic Ruysbroeck the Admirable, ‘occurs every day in just men’. And this coming occurs not exclusively in the heart of the Catholic or Protestant Christian, but in the heart of every man and every woman, regardless of the belief they profess, who practice justice, truth, fraternity, and love for all beings in the world. For Christ, who is the religious Instructor of all Humanity and in

¹⁸³ For background to the formation and administration of the movement, see Jiddu Krishnamurti, ‘The Order of the Star’, *Herald of the Star* 1:1 (January 1912), 1ff.

¹⁸⁴ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 186.

¹⁸⁵ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 310. In fact, for Delville, this illumination was seen as a precognition of the coming of Christ: He continued (*ibid.*) from the quoted paragraph: ‘... and it is the first time, it is said, in the course of the Ages, that so great a number of adherents have responded to the first signal, ready to come together and unite in the impulse of so sublime a hope as that of awaiting a Saviour—of the imminent Incarnation of Christ in a body prepared for Him this time within the Theosophical Society’.

whom all religious systems are fused in a perfect and glorious Unity, the various beliefs are spiritual channels through which the stream of His Love reaches all souls.¹⁸⁶

It is significant that the movement within the Theosophical Society, known as the Order of the Star in the East, adopted the five-pointed star as their emblem. The Order was founded in 1911 by Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, with Jiddu Krishnamurti (**Fig. 24**) as its head, to prepare for the imminent return of the World Teacher. A note by Delville—who served as National Representative for the Order in Belgium—was published in their journal, *The Herald of the Star*, where he outlined the purpose of the Order:

For several years, an international association of an entirely new character, known as the Order of the Star in the East, has been established in the world. It is composed of thousands of members belonging to diverse religions, races, beliefs, and nations, all united by the same expectation, belief, and certainty in the imminent Coming of a Great Spiritual Teacher ... This belief in the Advent of a Great Teacher is, moreover, founded on facts of the highest significance. At all great periods of human history, during times of political, religious, and social crises, when the dawn of a new civilization illuminates the world's horizon, a Spiritual Teacher appears, transforming the order of things through their religious and social teachings ... Independent of the evidence possessed by the

¹⁸⁶ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 141–142. Significantly, Delville described the Star of Initiation—placed on the forehead, or brow (which we have encountered in Schuré's description of Lucifer above)—as a symbol of those who bear the message of Truth, Wisdom and Love, personified in the lives of Christ and Buddha: 'it is the great and eternal Law of Love proclaimed by the Buddha, whose ideal is the Salvation of Humanity, and by Christ, whose ideal is the Redemption of the world. And it is the Law and the Ideal of the entire Hierarchy of the White Lodge. Happy are those who succeed in bringing themselves into harmony with this Law and with this Ideal! The keys to the mysteries of life and death belong to them, and the Star of Initiation shines above their brow. The triumph of the Sons of Light is achieved through Renunciation and through Sacrifice. The Path of spiritual Occultism is at once the most arduous and the sweetest to follow, because it leads most directly to Truth. The Buddha and Christ can guide our steps towards Her. In Them, the Orient and the Occident are fused, united in the same immense Love and in the same eternal Wisdom'. Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 362–363.

It is likely that Delville based much of his thinking on the nature of the return of the Christ on Besant's London Lectures of 1909. Besant covered this theme in detail in those lectures, for example in Part I, Lecture 6: 'The Coming Christ', and Part II, Lecture 6: 'The Nature of the Christ'. The lectures were published the following year: Annie Besant, *The Changing World and Lectures to Theosophical Students: Fifteen Lectures delivered in London during May, June, and July 1909*, London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1910, 132ff. and 297ff. respectively. Delville made direct reference to these lectures with regard to the belief in the return of the Christ in a newspaper article published in 1921 in *Le Soir*, repeating ideas that were current before the War in his and Besant's writings on the subject. See Delville, 'Une Vague de Messianisme. Jésus Reviendra-t-il? Et Quand?' *Le Soir* (4 March 1921), 1. The author of the piece was signed 'Jeanville', the pseudonym often used by Delville in his articles in local newspapers. For the identification of 'Jeanville' as Jean Delville, see Anon., 'Informations', *Bulletin de l'Ordre de l'Etoile d'Orient* (1 April 1921), 57–58.

Order of the Star in the East regarding the very imminent Coming of a new Spiritual Teacher, analogous to Those who preceded Him, we can draw from the current events disrupting Europe a number of proofs demonstrating that the time has come and the hour has struck to increasingly prepare public opinion for the great Event that will mark the beginnings of the 20th century.¹⁸⁷

In an article published in the October 1912 edition of the *Herald of the Star*, Besant gave a description of the significance of the symbol of the Star. Firstly, it served, as suggested above, as a symbol that heralded the coming of the World Teacher—much as the star of the Magi heralded the birth of Jesus Christ: ‘the announcement of the Coming of a World-Saviour, a World-Teacher; it is of Him that it is written: ‘We have seen His Star in the East’ ... and are preparing to give Him welcome, to pay Him homage ... It places on us a double duty: to prepare ourselves in our own hearts’.¹⁸⁸

But more importantly, she emphasised that the star represented the awakening of the inner spiritual consciousness within each individual—reinforcing her belief in the Mystical Christ outlined in her book, *Esoteric Christianity*:

The second chief meaning of the Star is that deep Mystery hidden in Humanity, wherein the Coming and the Life of a World-Saviour is re-lived in each aspiring and ascending human Spirit. It is the symbol of the Birth of the Holy Child within the sanctuary of the Spirit, of that first great Initiation in the Holy of Holies wherein the Little One is born, and enters into the Kingdom of Eternal Life. It is then that the Star verily rises in the East and stands over the Holy House where the Young Child is. And that Star is not only the witness that the Child-Christ is born in the heart of the disciple, but it is also the presage and the promise of the Christ-life that shall be re-lived. For as surely as that Star has risen, so surely shall it climb the curve of the over-arching sky, till it shines upon the Baptism wherein the Dove of Power descends on the beloved Son; upon the Transfiguration wherein the Divine shines through the human form; upon the Passion, gleaming crimson-red, when alone the strong man faces and conquers the forces of evil; and finally, blazing in the zenith with purest sheen of dazzling radiance, it become the Star of Resurrection and Ascension that shines on the Master Triumphant.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Jean Delville, ‘International Bulletin’, *Herald of the Star* 6 (1917), 334–335. Similarly, in *Le Christ reviendra*, 360–361, Delville wrote: ‘It is for this reason that today, as in all ages past, there exist men who possess the sacred privilege of drawing near to Their august presences and who merit to be Their messengers in the world. And since we have arrived at this cyclic period in which the world must be more openly prepared—perilously so, because the hour approaches when the Supreme Instructor, the Sole Initiator Himself, shall return among us—many things that have hitherto remained veiled and unknown will gradually be unveiled. Already, the powerful groups of disciples and Masters—those very ones who in the past were His defenders and His prophets—are preparing to rally around Him who shall be recognised as the Religious Head of the Earth; for the bodies of the Masters are reservoirs of great forces, centres of spiritual energy of considerable scope, and nothing can long resist the magical radiation of the Holy Will that animates them ...’.

¹⁸⁸ Annie Besant, ‘The Meaning of the Star’, *Herald of the Star* 1:4 (October 1912), 132–133.

¹⁸⁹ Besant, ‘The Meaning of the Star’, 134–135.

In the context of the above discussion, we can therefore infer another interpretation of the star borne aloft by Delville's *Prométhée*—as a mystical emblem that heralds the birth of the new Christ consciousness that was a core belief amongst Theosophists connected to Besant, including, of course, Delville himself. It is as if, in other words, his *Prométhée*, bearing the Star of Initiation, is a symbolic initiatory herald of the mystical Christ represented in *L'Homme-Dieu*, that is, in itself, a symbolic representation of the inner birth and manifestation of divine consciousness in humanity on the one hand, as well as the immanent incarnation of the *Christ-Maitreya* on the other hand. As such, one can understand why Delville conceived of both paintings simultaneously inasmuch as they both represent directly, in the case of *L'Homme-Dieu*, and indirectly, in the case of *Prométhée*, the core message of the Christology of the Theosophical movement at the turn of the twentieth century. This optimistic belief in the return of the Christ, the Light-bearer incarnate—bringing to humanity the message of the divine power within everyone—was a deeply felt desire that permeates much of Delville's later writings, art, and poetry. For example, an overt conflation of the *Christ-Maitreya* figure and the heraldic (or Luciferian) five-pointed Star of Initiation is vividly articulated in his *Le Porteur de la Lumière* (Fig. 20), where the radiant aura blazing behind the transcendent figure is in the form of the five-pointed star.

Delville expressed a passionate connection between the divine qualities within humanity and the transformative role of a future *Christos* that would reveal the universal truth of divine unity and liberate humanity spiritually in the twentieth century:

These few words are the echo of that great truth of *God within us*. There is no other proof of God's existence than that which a person can experience deep within their heart. The religious genius of the new humanity will, thanks to this inner light that Theosophy once again causes to shine in the world of humankind, enable 'the God within us to become an external power' ...

Love, Wisdom, Truth—these are the manifestations of the Divine within us! And it is still this ineffable Mystery of the Heart, the God within us, that the future Christ, the Lord of Compassion, will come to unveil, in all its strength and beauty, to the people of the 20th century. Thus, He will emancipate the religious consciousness of the world. By revealing the reality of the divine nature of all human beings, He will have made the Unity of religion understood, for from the divine Peace of the Heart alone can come the Peace of the World.¹⁹⁰

Finally, Delville articulated his fervent belief in the return of the Future Christ and the realisation of the 'divinity within' in one of his most evocative poems, *Le Christ Futur*. The poem conveys a profound message of hope for spiritual renewal, presenting the *Future Christ* as a universal saviour who brings divine wisdom, love, and peace. This messianic figure awakens humanity's inner potential for divinity, expressed in the lines: 'Your divine steps ... awaken in us a gentle and mighty god':

Le Christ Futur

The Future Christ

¹⁹⁰ Delville, *Le Christ reviendra*, 302–303, emphasis in original.

Vous qui devez venir, Seigneur,
comme aux temps sombres
où la terre disait: “dent pour dent, œil
pour œil”,
pour chasser de nos cœurs l’impur
amas des ombres,
de la croyance aveugle et de l’aveugle
orgueil,

Vous dont les claires mains sont
pleines de lumières
et qui donnez à tous le pain essentiel,
venez encor, Seigneur, jeter sur nos
misères
le merveilleux manteau de votre
immense Ciel!

Nous savons quelle paix nous
transforme et nous change,
lorsque vos pas divins passent dans
notre fange,
et font jaillir en nous un dieu suave et
fort;

nous savons quel amour rayonne dans
votre âme
pour les tristes enfants de ce vieux
monde infâme
qui préparent pour vous et l’outrage et
la mort.¹⁹¹

You who must come, O Lord, as in
those dark times
when the earth proclaimed: ‘a tooth for
a tooth, an eye for an eye’,
to drive from our hearts the impure
mass of shadows,
of blind belief and arrogant pride,

You whose radiant hands are filled
with light
and who give to all the essential bread,
come once more, O Lord, to cast upon
our miseries
the marvellous mantle of Your vast
Heaven!

We know what peace transforms and
renews us
when Your divine steps tread through
our mire,
and awaken in us a gentle and mighty
god;

We know what love radiates from
Your soul
for the sorrowful children of this vile,
ancient world,
who prepare for You both outrage and
death.

This transcendent idea of the Future Christ, ‘whose radiant hands are filled with light’, is vividly evoked in his *Le Porteur de la Lumière*. Moreover, the depiction of the future *Christ-Maitreya*, with radiant hands guiding humanity towards spiritual awakening, is most eloquently realised in his late major work, *L’Ascension Humaine* (Fig. 19).

Conclusion

This study examined an important period of development in Jean Delville’s artistic and intellectual career from 1900 to 1907. Delville’s significant artistic advances in his *œuvre* in the early twentieth century are traced through a detailed examination of three seminal Theosophically inspired paintings: *L’Amour des Âmes* (1900), *L’Homme-Dieu* (1903), and *Prométhée* (1907). These works, created successively during of the first few years of the new century, form a cohesive iconographic programme founded in esoteric Theosophy and Delville’s

¹⁹¹ Jean Delville, ‘Sonnet’, “Le Christ Futur”, *La Belgique Artistique et Littéraire* 19:56 (May 1910), 198. Later republished in his anthology *Les Splendeurs Méconnues*, 153.

Idealist aesthetic. By analysing their iconographic and thematic frameworks in relation to the writings of Édouard Schuré and Annie Besant, this essay has emphasised the relationship between Delville's artistic practice and his spiritual ideals, placing him as a notable figure in the contemporary Theosophical art movement.

The relationship between *L'Amour des Âmes*, *L'Homme-Dieu*, and *Prométhée* is central to Delville's Theosophical vision, unified by visual motifs such as the shared otherworldly setting of each work and unique Theosophical symbols such as the five-pointed star—the underlying symbol of spiritual consciousness. In *L'Amour des Âmes*, Delville portrayed the soul's ascension and spiritual union, where the figures embody unity in love and freedom from earthly limitations, prefiguring the divine awakening central to his later works. This theme evolves in *L'Homme-Dieu*, where the Christ figure, reinterpreted through Besant's *Esoteric Christianity*, represents the mystical awakening of inner divinity, with the star motif implicit in the heralding of the mystical Christ embodied in the radiant 'Man-God' of the title. *Prométhée* completes this narrative sequence, reimagining the Titan as a Luciferian light-bearer, bearing aloft the radiant five-pointed star to symbolise spiritual enlightenment as well as heralding the awakening of the new Christ consciousness that was widely promoted in Delville's, and fellow Theosophists', writings of the time. Together, these paintings express a progressive initiatory quest: from the soul's evolutionary ascension (*L'Amour des Âmes*), through the awakening of divine consciousness (*L'Homme-Dieu*), to the active diffusion of spiritual consciousness (*Prométhée*). Their shared celestial settings reinforce this metaphysical journey, suggesting a universal narrative of spiritual evolution that transcends earthly limitations.

The symbols of the star and the cross representing the Luciferian and Christological duality articulated in Schuré's *Les enfants de Lucifer* lies implicitly in the background of these works invoking the relationship between spiritual enlightenment through knowledge and individuality on the one hand and the manifestation of inner divinity of the esoteric Christ through the necessary sacrifice of worldly encumbrances on the other hand. Besant's writings on the subject contributed greatly to Delville's Theosophical thesis, with the concept of the 'Star of Initiation' linking the inner Christ consciousness to the external heralding of a World Teacher, as embodied in the *Order of the Star in the East*. Delville's paintings thus operate as visual expression of these ideas, drawing the works together in a narrative of transfiguration, spiritual liberation, and transcendence. *L'Amour des Âmes* serves as the foundational piece, establishing the soul's potential for divinity, which *L'Homme-Dieu* and *Prométhée* realise through complementary paths of mystical union and spiritual enlightenment.

Delville's commitment to *L'Art Social* further underlies these three works, where the larger works were intended for public contexts with their messages of greater moral and spiritual awareness. His vision for his *Prométhée* and *L'Homme-Dieu* to be displayed in a public setting reflects his belief in the potential for art to serve a transformative social function, as articulated in *La Mission de l'Art*. Despite resistance from the Catholic Church and the contemporary *avant-garde*, Delville's rhetorical polemics against mainstream religious and artistic traditions identify him with the Luciferian archetype he depicted—a rebellious light-bearer seeking to illuminate a spiritually dormant world. This defiance, together with his articulation of Theosophical doctrines, constructs the artist as a Promethean figure in *fin-de-siècle* culture, whose art sought to liberate human consciousness through beauty and spiritual truth.

The significance of Delville's early Theosophical period operates in a wider historical context, where his art can be seen as part of a broader Theosophical art movement, relating to contemporaries like Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky, who explored spiritual abstraction

through their similar contact with Theosophy (Maurice Tuchman et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* [New York: Abbeville Press, 1987], 134ff). By synthesising Schuré's esoteric narratives and Besant's Christological reinterpretations, Delville created a visual iconographic programme that represented a significant development beyond his Symbolist origins into early modernism. His work invites further exploration of how Theosophy shaped artistic innovation, particularly in the use of symbolic motifs to convey universal truths, and to further the quest to achieve spiritual and social harmony through the transformative power of Idealist art. Ultimately, *L'Amour des Âmes*, *L'Homme-Dieu*, and *Prométhée* stand as a testament to Delville's quest to reveal *une Révélation nouvelle de la Sagesse Divine*—or 'a new Revelation of the divine Wisdom' through Theosophy.

Appendix

Delville petitioned the Mayor of the City of Bruges, Victor Van Hoestenbergh, in a letter dated Mons, 21 May 1939 (see **Fig. 9**), to have *L'Homme-Dieu* placed in the Salle des Pas-Perdus. The letter is part of the Delville collection in the Groeningemuseum in Bruges. The transcript is as follows:

Monsieur le Bourgmestre,

J'ai l'honneur de faire don à la Ville de Bruges de l'un de mes œuvres principales, *L'Homme-Dieu*, symbolisant le Christ attirant vers Lui l'Humanité souffrante.

Elle fut commencée en 1901 en Angleterre, à l'époque où j'étais premier Professeur à la Glasgow School of Art et achevée en 1903. Elle a été conçue pour être placée dans un monument public afin de s'y harmoniser avec la pierre des murailles.

Exposée à l'Exposition universelle de Gand dans la grande salle de la Peinture monumentale le Roi Albert s'arrêta longuement devant mon œuvre en m'exprimant son admiration, ainsi que le vœu de la voir placer dans un des monuments de l'une de nos villes belges. La même vœu Leopold II l'exprima également quelques années auparavant, à l'un des grands Salons officiels de Bruxelles.

Depuis, j'ai beaucoup cherché un emplacement convenable. Mais, soit à cause des dimensions (5,50m de large sur 5m de haut), soit aussi au manque de cadre architectural ou à des défauts de l'éclairage, l'occasion favorable pour la présentation d'une telle œuvre ne m'était pas encore échue jusqu'ici.

J'ai pensé alors à Bruges, ville d'art, à la fois mystique et monumentale, qui conviendrait le mieux au caractère de *L'Homme-Dieu* et où on parvient, faut être, le cadre approprié. J'ai demandé à mon collègue de la Commission Royale des monuments de bien vouloir chercher un emplacement dans l'un des édifices de votre artistique cité flamande et il n'a point tardé à me signaler la Salle des Pas Perdus de votre magnifique Hôtel de Ville. C'est donc à Mr. C. Tulpinck à son extrême obligeance et à sa parfaite connaissance des beautés de Bruges que je dois avoir, en fin de compte, trouvé en votre bonne ville un cadre architectural qui convient admirablement à mon œuvre.

Il s'agit de la surface se trouvant au bas de l'escalier, en restait de l'ogive, et dont les dimensions correspondent à celles de l'œuvre en question. Le petit croquis ci-dessous indique l'endroit de la Salle des Pas perdus. Je me suis rendu vendredi dernier à l'Hôtel de Ville, où J'ai été fort aimablement accueilli par Monsieur Delva, secrétaire Communal, ainsi que par Mr. Tulpinck, mon excellent collègue.

Ensemble, et de commun accord, nous avons pu ainsi nous rendre compte de visu de l'effet hautement décoratif que produirait mon œuvre à cet endroit, après avoir pris les mesures nécessaires.

Si donc l'Administration Communale consent à l'emplacement idéal que j'indique, je prendrai les dispositions nécessaires pour faire expédier la toile roulée, le châssis, ainsi que le cadre directement à l'Hôtel de Ville. M. Tulpinck se chargera de surveiller le travail du montage et de l'adaptation de l'œuvre à la muraille, ainsi que ce fut entendu. Le travail pouvait s'effectuer aisément et très vite. Il serait désirable que le placement soit effectué au moment de l'ouverture de l'Exposition Memling.

Dans l'espoir que mon offre sera accueillie avec faveur par le Ville de Bruges, veuillez agréer, je vous prie, Monsieur le Bourgmestre, l'assurance de ma haute considération.

Jean Delville
Membre de l'Académie
Royale de Belgique

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List of Figures

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Fig. 1. *L'École de Platon*, 1898, oil on canvas, 206 x 605 cm. Paris: Musée d'Orsay, RMN-Grand-Palais, inv. RF 1979-34. / photo: the author.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delville_school_plato.jpg

Fig. 2. *L'amour des Ames*, 1900, tempera and oil on canvas, 258 x 150 cm. Brussels: Musée d'Ixelles. / photo: the author.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%E2%80%99Amour_des_%C3%A2mes_\(1900\)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%E2%80%99Amour_des_%C3%A2mes_(1900)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg)

Fig. 3. *L'Homme-Dieu*, 1905, oil on canvas, 550 x 500 cm. Bruges: Musea Brugge. / photo: the author.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%27Homme-Dieu_\(1903\)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%27Homme-Dieu_(1903)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg)

Fig. 4. Jean Delville, *Prométhée*, 1907, oil on canvas, 4.5 by 2.5m. Brussels: l'Université libre de Bruxelles. / photo: the author.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prom%C3%A9th%C3%A9_\(1907\)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prom%C3%A9th%C3%A9_(1907)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg)

Fig. 5. Jean Delville. Study for *L'Homme-Dieu*. 1900, oil on canvas, 62½ x 67 in. (158 x 169 cm.), signed, inscribed, and dated 'Jean Delville esquisse de l'Homme-Dieu 1900' (lower left). Private Collection.

Fig. 6. Jean Delville in front of *L'Homme-Dieu*, c. 1903, photograph. Private collection. Photograph. Collection Miriam Delville.

Fig. 7. Jean Delville in his studio in front of *Prométhée*, after 1907, photograph. Private collection. Photograph. Collection Miriam Delville.

Fig. 8. Sketch for the placement of *L'Homme-Dieu* in *L'Eglise Notre-Dame de la Chapelle* in Brussels, c. 1901–1903, pencil and ink on paper, 24.2 x 12.4 cm. Private Collection.

Fig. 9. Letter from Jean Delville to Victor Van Hoestenbergh, Mons, 21 May 1939. Bruges, Groeninge Museum, with illustration, regarding the proposed placement of *L'Homme-Dieu* in the *Salle des Pas-Perdus* in the Palais de Justice, Bruges.

Fig. 10. Photo of Jean Delville in front of *La Justice ancienne* ou *La Justice d'autrefois*, c. 1911–1914 (left) and *La Justice idéale* ou *La Justice, la Loi et la Pitié* (right in photo). Right: Delville: study for *La Justice idéale* ou *La Justice, la Loi et la Pitié*, c.1911–1914, oil on canvas, Brussels: Palais de Justice. Photograph. Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Archives of Contemporary Art, Eggermont Collection.

Fig. 11. *Les Forces*, 1924, oil on canvas, 500 x 800 cm. Brussels, Palais de Justice. / photo: the author.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Les_forces_\(1924\)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Les_forces_(1924)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg)

Fig. 12. *L'Homme-Dieu*, detail. / photo: the author.

Fig. 13. *L'Homme-Dieu*, detail. / photo: the author.

Fig. 14. *L'Homme-Dieu*, detail. / photo: the author.

Fig. 15. *L'Homme-Dieu*, detail. / photo: the author.

Fig. 16. Study for *Le Cycle Passionnel*, c. 1890, pencil on paper, 29.8 x 39.4 cm. Private Collection.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_cycle_des_passions_\(1890\)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_cycle_des_passions_(1890)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg)

Fig. 17. *Les Trésors de Sathan*, 1895, oil on canvas, 258 x 268 cm.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delville,_Jean_\(Belgian,_1867-1953\)3.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delville,_Jean_(Belgian,_1867-1953)3.jpg)

Fig. 18. *La Roue du monde*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 298.4 x 231.1 cm. Antwerp, musée royal des Beaux-Arts. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_roue_du_monde_\(1940\)_-_Jean_Delville.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_roue_du_monde_(1940)_-_Jean_Delville.png)

Fig. 19 *L'Ascension Humaine* (1942). Location unknown. (n.d.).

Fig. 20. *Le Porteur de la Lumière* (n.d.)

Fig. 21. Photo of Delville and Annie Besant, (n.d.). Private Collection.

Fig. 22. *Tristan et Yseult*, 1887, pencil, black chalk and charcoal on paper, 44.3 x 75.4 cm. Brussels: © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tristan_et_Yseult_\(1887\)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tristan_et_Yseult_(1887)_-_Jean_Delville.jpg)

Fig. 23. *Self-portrait*, 1904, pencil and charcoal on paper, 57 x 38 cm. Private Collection.

Fig. 24. Photo of Jean Delville with Paul Otlet meeting Krishnamurti (1895–1986), Annual Star Camp, Ommen, Netherlands, August, 1929. Private Collection.

Note on Contributor

Brendan Cole is an independent art historian specialising in late-19th-century non-realist and Symbolist art, with a primary focus on the iconography of Belgian Idealist painters such as Jean Delville and Fernand Khnopff. He has published widely on Symbolist art, and the work of Delville, in international journals and authored a leading monograph on the artist's work, *Jean Delville: Art between Nature and the Absolute*.