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“NOT SIMPLE TRUTH BUT COMPLEX BEAUTY”:
DETAILS IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND AESTHETICS

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Not simple truth but complex beauty”:

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This dissertation argues that the perception and representation of the seemingly objective details that proliferate in Victorian literature and aesthetics are modes for the constitution of subjectivity, in the work of four Victorian writers: John Ruskin, Robert Browning, George Eliot, and Oscar Wilde. Traditionally, literary details, as parts that resist containment within larger narrative structures and formal imperatives, have been viewed as empty, superfluous entities, synonymous with minuteness and marginality, the supposedly manifest visual nature of which translates into unproblematic and objective verbal representation. However, Victorian writers were keenly aware – and apprehensive – that details (derived from the French *détailler*: to carve), far from being given entities, are created by subjects through processes of selection and analysis, so that the appearance of objectivity they present is generated by, and can reveal, perceiving subjects. Victorian writers employed the perception and (mis)interpretation of details by characters as a plot device to represent and interrogate subjectivities. Simultaneously, they identified the selection of details as a means of generating the writer’s personal style, precisely because details resist attempts at containment. Thus, the Victorians reconceptualized the aesthetic imperfection of details into an enabling condition for the generation of subjectivity.

I trace the representation of details through two seemingly opposed, major nineteenth-century movements: realism and Aestheticism. My first chapter examines how John Ruskin audaciously champions the irregular ornamental details of Gothic architecture as expressive of the artisan's free subjectivity – while still seeking to contain them within larger aesthetic frameworks, in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3). My second chapter explores how Robert Browning emancipates details and subjectivity from containment in *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), which proliferates in details seemingly unrelated to the plot. My third chapter examines how George Eliot represents the serious epistemic imperative to “dwell on every detail and its possible meaning” in *Middlemarch* (1871-2) as leading to powerful, but objectively misguided, subjective awakenings. My final chapter traces how Oscar Wilde ironically consummates details' subjective tendencies identified by Ruskin, by representing attention to the details of artworks as a pleasurable mode of self-constitution and self-dissolution in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

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How to fix a measure upon inspiration and influence? For it can only be known in its effects; the stimulation and support of those who inspired me in this project are incalculably diffused¹ in the result they helped bring about. A strand of influence might surface for a moment in the arc of an argument, in a catenary phrase linking two thoughts together. Nevertheless, I shall attempt to gather them here:

I owe a debt of gratitude to my dissertation director, Professor Jonah Siegel, who has inspired me to think harder and to write better from my first year at Rutgers. With infinite patience and wit, he helped me understand that the richly sensuous details of nineteenth-century literature and art that I loved had a history that was considerably more contradictory than I was comfortable with acknowledging. His guidance and support enabled me to appreciate the disquieting, generative beauty of irreconciled forms that I explore in this work, and the pursuit of which lies at the heart of our critical vocation.

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¹ I borrow this phrase from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

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beauty in the fact of difference. My mother lent her strength to me to pursue the beauty I did not understand. Even more so, she presented me with a vision of that beauty, though neither of us realized it at the time. When I was a child, she brought me a copy of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. As a girl of nine, I first encountered in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the richly sensuous, detailed descriptions of material details that struck me for the vivid sense of life flickering beneath the surfaces of words. I remember thinking it would be nice to find out what made those descriptions feel so alive. I have been fortunate to pursue the liveliness of those descriptions in my dissertation, and my attempt to decipher their mystery forms the final sections of this dissertation's concluding chapter.

Last but not least, I owe thanks to Professor Stephen Heath, at the University of Cambridge. It was in his undergraduate seminar that I first encountered Ruskin, in a single slip of paper, a handout with a few paragraphs from "The Nature of Gothic." Though I was only dimly aware of Ruskin's work at the time, I was enraptured by what seemed to me a boldly counterintuitive argument: that the Gothic was beautiful precisely in its ugliness, that its asymmetries and imperfections made it a more vital and richly expressive mode of architecture – and of aesthetics in general – than the perfect classical forms that dominated contemporary aesthetic hierarchies. I found the architecture itself to be singularly unprepossessing, but I found the argument beautiful, a richly digressive line of thought that branched into live digressions and debates, and knotted itself into intricate webs in which one could get lost. I have been unraveling that tangled skein of beauty ever since.

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Introduction

I. Prologue

In the 1870s, the Italian art critic Giovanni Morelli proposed a new method of attributing paintings by concentrating on the marginal details of the bodies depicted – the fleshy rounds of earlobes, the curved moons of fingernails, and so on.¹ By this method, Titian is found to “adher[e] to the same round form of ear” in his early works, leading Morelli to conclude: “details, in themselves insignificant, may lead us to the truth” (47). This is a sensational reversal of the then-prevalent mode of art attribution, where a trained critic would identify the artist based on his general impression of the painting, and specifically his observance of the most noticeable characteristics, such as Leonardesque smiles, or the pious heavenward gaze of Raphael’s saints. However, Morelli counters that while the artist might consciously paint central features in accordance with prevalent artistic conventions, it is in his treatment of details that his personal idiosyncrasies are likelier to emerge:

[A]s men who speak or write have verbal habits and use their favourite words or phrases involuntarily and sometimes even inappropriately, so almost every painter has his own peculiarities which escape him without his being aware of them...

Anyone, who wants to study a painter closely must know how to discover these material trifles and attend to them with care (Morelli, *Italian Painters* I 75, trans. and cited Wind 38).

¹ Morelli described this method in stages, in a series of articles published between 1874-76 in *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, a German art history journal. However, his complete enunciation of his method appears in his book *Italian Painters*, originally published in German in 1880. Except when specified otherwise, quotes from Morelli are taken from the 1893 English translation by Constance Ffoulkes.

According to Morelli's proto-Freudian logic,² it is in the representation of "insignificant details" that the artist is most likely to relax his conscious exertions, instead creating almost unconsciously, so that he reveals his innermost self precisely where he is least given to conscious thought and effort. Morelli's detail-oriented method can be traced to his era and genre of choice – fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance art – which, Carlo Ginzburg argues, witnessed a "historical process that... turned details into wholes, establishing new pictorial genres such as landscape and still life" ("Notes" 496). At the same time, however, Morelli's identification of the artist's self with minute, marginal details is a late manifestation of a specifically nineteenth-century phenomenon that constitutes the topic of my project: namely, the alignment of subjectivity with objectivity, the identification of the forming power of subjectivity in the appearance of objectivity that details afford.

In this dissertation, I explore the proliferation of details in Victorian literature and aesthetics, not simply to offer another account of a well-known characteristic of aesthetic work in the period, but to demonstrate the ways in which this tendency is part of a wider reflection on the intersection of subjectivity and form in the nineteenth century. I argue that the perception and representation of seemingly objective details are modes for the formation of subjectivities, in the work of four seminal Victorian writers: John Ruskin, Robert Browning, George Eliot, and Oscar Wilde. Nineteenth-century literary details have been typically viewed as empty, superfluous entities, as parts that resist containment within larger narrative structures and are thus synonymous with minuteness and marginality. However, Victorian writers viewed details not as given entities, but as

² Carlo Ginzburg argues that Morelli's method was a powerful influence on Freud, and is even alluded to in the Sherlock Holmes' stories (Ginzburg 1980).

constructed by perceiving subjects. Rather than presenting details as manifest visual elements that translate unproblematically into objective verbal representation, Victorian writers used details to posit the existence of subjectivities that are inseparable from the details they create, thereby questioning the divide between subjectivity and objectivity.

Victorian engagements with detail are characterized by a fascination with the aesthetic capacities of details – that their, the opportunities they offer to depict subjective perception and affects that are inseparable from the details in which they are embodied – and apprehension about the subjective origin of seemingly objective details. The result is diastole and systole of dilation and containment, played out in the relative emancipation of details by identifying in them the expressive power of subjectivity, followed by attempts to contain details – attempts that paradoxically generate and intensify the subjectivity, and the details, they are intended to suppress. I trace this mutually constitutive dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity across the two key movements in Victorian literature that are usually viewed as in opposition to each other: realism and Aestheticism. While realist writers such as John Ruskin sought to suppress and contain the subjective and aesthetic tendencies of details by emphasizing their appearance of objectivity and of mimesis, Aesthetic writers such as Wilde explicitly acknowledged details' suppressed subjective capacities, by making the selection of details the basis of aesthetic and personal perfection. Thus, Aestheticism can be viewed as fulfilling the reconfiguration of representation that realism signifies. The mimetic details of realism, which proliferate in disruption of classical ideas of aesthetic form, signify a broader aesthetic break that is realized by the consciously self-indulgent strategies of Aestheticism, where details take over the wholes they comprise.

In tracing the above trajectory, I offer an alternate history of aesthetics that plays out across nineteenth-century British, and specifically Victorian, literature. The Victorian era is largely excluded from narratives of the history of aesthetic philosophy, which largely center on Continental movements. The profuse and seemingly objective details in Victorian literature have generally been equated with the fundamentally unaesthetic nature of everyday modernity, the banality and shapelessness of which violates the symmetries of aesthetic form. Yet, as we shall see, recent research in aesthetics led by Jacques Rancière has posited an unlikely relationship between these details and the very idea of aesthetics as an autonomous realm of affective experience. Rancière traces this idea of aesthetics to a broader disruption from the late eighteenth century onwards of classical hierarchies of representation, based on the subordination of parts to the whole, by a modern representational order, where the lack of fit between parts and wholes – as instantiated by excess details – signifies the advent of subjectivity and personal creativity. Details, as parts of wholes that also function as wholes in their own right, thus disrupting the larger wholes they comprise, encapsulate in miniature the constitutive contradictions of modern aesthetics. While the very proliferation of details signifies a break in order, this break is heightened by the narrative and aesthetic operations that enabled by details.

When Victorian writers derived their plot and narrative strategies from the perception of details, they based their aesthetic and epistemic explorations on an entity whose philosophical resonances were of the slippery lack of fit between form and content. Writers as seemingly opposed as George Eliot and Oscar Wilde used the continual misperception and misinterpretation of details by characters to interrogate the idea of unified, coherent, and progressively maturing subjectivities. At the same time,

Victorian critics ranging from G.H. Lewes to Walter Pater viewed the selection – and omission – representation of details as the generative mode for a personal style, albeit one that, given the fundamental disruptiveness of details, inheres more in its struggles and failures than in its successes. Far from being unaesthetic elements that render external, everyday reality in terms of objective and uncreative representation, details can be viewed as the representative units of aesthetic modernity that make possible its greatest achievement: the generation of subjectivity.

I. What We Talk About When We Talk About Detail

The idea that details are created by subjects through the processes of selection and analysis, and can thus reveal the subjects that create them, necessitates a revaluation of the nature of the detail as an aesthetic category. Specifically, it leads to the question: what is a detail? Or, to rephrase the question by drawing on Morelli's analysis: if the "insignificant details" of paintings and literature are revelatory of the innermost self of the artist or writer, what selves, what drives and desires are revealed through the verbal use of details, and the concept of "detail" itself?

The word "detail" itself is generally tossed about with a telling unthinkingness, often in seemingly opposite contexts, which reveals an underlying instability in this supposedly most stable and self-evident of entities. Details can imply something essential – most famously captured in the phrase "God is in the details" (commonly attributed to the art historian Aby Warburg, one of the chief explorers of detail in nineteenth-century aesthetics).³ At the same time, however, details also connote superfluity, such as the detail of the beading on a dress: lavishly beautiful but unnecessary (I will expand on this

³ This phrase has also been attributed to Flaubert and to Mies van der Rohe. For the purposes of this chapter, I follow Daniel Arasse's attribution of this phrase to Warburg (2).

view shortly with reference to the widely influential work of Roland Barthes). Attention to detail usually elicits admiration, but can also meet with concern that he or she risks losing oneself amid details. That detail is used both to denote both something essential and its opposite attests to a fundamental instability that underlies categories of value – an instability born of the awareness that the apportioning of value proceeds on criteria that are to an extent arbitrary and subjective.

The fundamental instability at the core of detail is illuminated when one looks to the era with which it is most commonly identified: the nineteenth century. Naomi Schor views the nineteenth century as “the Golden Age of the Detail,” citing, as might be expected, the realist novel as well as the psychoanalytic investigations of Sigmund Freud as evidence for “the existence of a *Zeitgeist* which gives the detail pride of place” (77). In her seminal account of detail, Schor primarily looks to nineteenth-century French literature and Continental philosophy to trace the trajectory of details, from banishment under neoclassical and idealist paradigms to its postmodern “valorization” (xiv).⁴ In this account, the nineteenth century is characterized by the “valorization of totalization” – the integration of detail within a totality – while the emancipation of detail (the idea that detail is a form in its own right) is largely identified with twentieth-century thought (though it begins in the late nineteenth century itself, with the work of Morelli and Freud, 85). However, a look at nineteenth-century responses to detail across the Channel reveals both the “totalization” and “detotalization” of details to be prevalent among contemporary responses to detail.

⁴ Schor does examine Reynolds’s *Discourses* in her opening chapter as an example of the neoclassical denigration of details, which she does not specifically explore its influence on nineteenth-century British (Romantic or Victorian) literature.

Both the “totalization” and “detotalization” of details are evident in the richly ambivalent responses to details by Victorian commentators, which range from the outright censure of “excess” details to the cautious recognition and acceptance of the truth-value of a degree of particularity. When the twenty-year old artist John Everett Millais painstakingly painted the biblical Joseph with the strongly veined arms of a real carpenter, reviewers accused him of “loathsome minuteness”⁵ (a century later, though, a latter-day Morelli might gratefully seize upon such minuteness to identify a lost Millais, should the occasion arise). In *The Principles of Success in Literature* (1865), G.H. Lewes rejected “detailism” – “an obtrusiveness of detail and a preference for the Familiar” (84) – in favor of what he termed *characteristic detail*, or detail as characteristic of a person or setting. What these responses share is an anxiety about the upending of hierarchies of value – as played out in the movement to the center of representation of a form that was generally relegated to the margins. At the same time, Lewes’s conception of “characteristic detail” evinces a recognition of the creative possibilities than can be exploited through details – if one manages to resist detail’s absorbing and nihilistic connotations of excess. It is this ambivalence that is at the heart of the literary attempts that I study in this project to use details in consciously selective, carefully limited ways to represent subjects and situations – ways that paradoxically enhance the disruptive power of details.

That details can signify both the disruption of representational order, and serve as the basis of new modes of representation, attests to the instability at their core. Far from being a self-evident entity that is synonymous with minuteness, materiality, and

⁵ Review of Millais’ “Christ in the House of his Parents” (1850), “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy,” in *The Times*, May 9, 1850.

marginality, the detail is a form for ambivalence and disruptiveness. Its very proliferation in nineteenth-century art and literature is the result of a break in aesthetic hierarchies, of which the supersession of classicism and neoclassicism by realism is only the best-known manifestation (I explore this aesthetic break further in the next section). However, details do not merely signify aesthetic disruption: disruptiveness is encoded, as it were, in their very form. A detail is a dual entity, being a whole in its own right, while also being part of a larger whole, depending on the context. To attempt a definition of detail is thus not to describe a given entity, but to mold the form of the concept to a shifting site of ambiguity.

In my definition (if I may claim so definite a term) of detail, I have sought to embrace the inescapable element of ambiguity rather than to excise it. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a detail as “An item, a particular (of an account, a process, etc.); a minute or subordinate portion of any (*esp.* a large or complex) whole” (3.a.). but attention to minute or subordinate parts already makes them less subordinate, and more perceivable as wholes, making explicit the presence of a visual regime where the distinction between part and wholes is increasingly blurred. Drawing on the disruptiveness implicit in this definition, I view detail as any part that stands out from the whole, that disrupts, however momentarily, the whole in which it is embedded, by being perceivable as a whole in its own right. I include in this definition not only elements of description – though descriptive details are indeed the prime example, as their very presence and profusion is the chief example of the break in aesthetic hierarchies that has key narrative and formal implications for nineteenth-century literature – but also characters and elements of plot, depending on the context. Indeed, I argue that the writers

I explore undermines the conventional distinctions between narrative, character and description, by enacting characters engage – or fail to engage – with details at crucial moments of the plot, or having a character stand out in a wider tableau observed by another character, or the narrator. If this understand of detail seems too dependent on the subjectivity of the perceiver, this is in keeping with the etymology of the term, which is derived from the French word *détailler*, meaning to cut or to carve. The representation of detail thus “presupposes,” as Omar Calabrese writes, “a subject that ‘cuts’ an object,” in accordance with a “program of action” derived from his (the subject’s) perspective (Calabrese 70; see Arasse 11-12). Thus, to speak of detail is not to conjure a self-evident entity, but to negotiate a fluctuating, mutually constitutive relationship between parts and wholes, and by extension, between the self and the world.

Crucially, details embody subjectivities that are inseparable from the world they carve. Daniel Arasse calls the detail an “excessively subjective” phenomenon, arguing that the specific reasons and motivations that guide the “point de vue du ‘détaillant’” (the gaze of the one who ‘makes the detail’) remain elusive: “What happens in those privileged moments in which a detail makes itself seen?” (12; my translation). We may never know what motivates the self to select one element of a wider scene and carve it out as a whole. The self disperses itself in the details it carves, so that their representation becomes a mode of concealing and fragmenting the self as much as revealing it.

As a mode of self-objectification, details casts new light on the nineteenth-century imperative of “objectivity,” which was supposedly realized (among other things) through the faithful empirical perception of particulars. However, as Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston argue, the emergence of “objectivity” as an epistemic goal in the nineteenth

century is inseparable from the increasing awareness of subjectivity as a distorting force to be suppressed. Objectivity can only be attained through “the negating of subjectivity by the subject,” so that practices aimed at cultivating objectivity – such as the observation of details – paradoxically intensify the self they are intended to suppress (Galison and Daston 204). Details thus become a means for this paradoxical self-creating and -intensifying suppression of subjectivity. The appearance of objectivity that details effect is the creation of perceiving subjectivities that are dispersed in the details they create.

The effects of this paradoxical dialectic of self-objectification can be seen in two distinct but frequently overlapping modes of detail. Arasse illuminates these two modes of detail by drawing on the two Italian words for detail: the *particolare*, which is “a small part of a figure, an object or an ensemble” (the usual understanding of detail), and the *dettaglio*, which is “the result or trace of the action of the one who ‘makes the detail’” (11). While the *particolare* is integrated in the usually mimetic totality it comprises, the *dettaglio* is imbued with the intimate meaning of its creator, and thus has claims to formal autonomy at variance with the wider scene. Nor is the distinction between the two absolute: the same detail can be a mimetic representation of reality, while also, by the very fact of its selection, reveal a secret meaning that “dislocates” the overall form and meaning of the whole it comprises. This “dislocation” of the *dettaglio* builds on the broader disruption of aesthetic order signified by the very presence of detail as a *particolare*.

In other words, while the very presence of seemingly objective details, or particulars, signifies the disruption of aesthetic order, this disruption is heightened by the ways in which they can be used to represent contingent, subjective perceptions, emotions,

and values. In this context, the carefully limited and selective representation of detail paradoxically heightens the distorting power of subjectivity that gives detail their disruptiveness. Victorian engagements with details are thus characterized by a struggle between details and the whole – between using details to lend solidity and substance to a whole, while restraining them from dislocating and taking over the whole they comprise. I trace this struggle through realism and Aestheticism: broadly speaking, while realist writers sought to suppress the element of subjectivity, by emphasizing details claims to objectivity and mimesis – and, paradoxically, generating and intensifying the subjectivity they sought to suppress – Aesthetic writers made explicit the element of subjectivity, by acknowledging detail as a constructed entity, created by the activity of a perceiver, and using details as the basis of their understanding of form. Thus Aesthetic proscriptions of detail in practice paradoxically consummate the logic behind the realism representation of details: the break in aesthetic hierarchies of representation signified by the advent of subjectivity.

II. What They Talked About When They Talked About Detail

In keeping with our discussion of the connection between detail and subjectivity, I open this section with a brief confessional account of my own engagements with critical readings on the detail. Having resolved to carry out research in Victorian literature, I, like any other Victorianist graduate student, dutifully plunged into the established critical corpus on nineteenth-century literary details, headed by Roland Barthes's "The Reality Effect" (1968). Barthes famously views details as "notations" that, lacking a narrative or characterological function, effect the representation of an empty reality that is itself void of function: it simply *is* (146). At the other end of the critical spectrum from Barthes, but

equally influential on the identification of detail with reality, are investigations into the nineteenth-century British realist novel led by Ian Watt. These investigations equated the representation of details with the nineteenth-century pursuit of “a reality that stretched beyond the reach of language” (Levine “Realistic Imagination 12), even as this pursuit was informed by the consciousness that this reality might remain elusive. What the above approaches have in common, however, is a tendency to view details in collective terms, as “description,” which is equated with the unproblematic and uncreative verbal representation of reality.

In the above works, to speak of detail is not to speak of detail at all – not to engage with details as individual entities that possess the aesthetic or conceptual significance that merits the sharp individuating attention of a critic. Such approaches seemed inadequate to engage with the highly aestheticized (in different ways) representations of details I found in novels such as *Middlemarch* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where they seemed infused with a singular animation and energy that destabilized the stable appearance of a single reality. In their liveliness, they appeared to embody a conception of subjectivity itself.

I found a clue to the vitality of details in Jacques Rancière’s recent work on nineteenth-century aesthetics, which recasts the advent of literary realism with reference to broader developments in the history and philosophy of aesthetics. In his lecture “The Politics of Fiction” (2009), Rancière views detail not as Barthesian “descriptors of the visible,” but as “operators producing differences of intensity” that “evinc[e] the capacity of anybody... to turn the routine of the everyday into the depth of passion” (“Politics” 2009). As parts that do not cohere to a whole, details signal the disruption of the older,

classical order of narrative (which comprises a sequence of momentous acts committed by aristocratic characters) in favor of a new democratic order where anyone might be able to feel anything, and the minutiae of everyday life enables plebeian characters to experience the passions and reveries previously reserved for aristocrats. In *Aisthesis*, Rancière identifies this new, democratic conception of narrative as part of a broader cultural shift that resulted in the emergence of our modern understanding of art as an autonomous realm of affective experience. Rancière traces this understanding of art to what he calls the “aesthetic regime of art”: material conditions and modes of perception from the late eighteenth century onwards that disrupted and reconfigured the classical representational order – based on the symmetries of specific “fine arts” – to include “images, objects and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art,” such the highly detailed works of modern literature and genre painting (x-xii)⁶. While these fleeting or fragmented forms were previously excluded from the representational order because of their violation of classical symmetry and harmony, they were now “experienced as events and associated with the idea of artistic creation” precisely in their violation (x). Thus, Rancière views nineteenth-century literary details not in terms of the empty denotation of reality, but as signifying the advent of a modern, non-hierarchical understanding of art itself.

Momentous as Rancière’s insight was for my project, however, it was limited by its consideration of details in collective terms (as did Barthes), as description. Thus, it was inadequate to explain the diverse aesthetic operations that I identified in individual details. From the “naturalistic” stone ornamentation of Gothic architecture described by

⁶ I explore this “aesthetic regime of art” in more detail in each of my four chapters.

John Ruskin to the “aesthetic” evocations of sounds and scents by Oscar Wilde, Victorian literary details confound notions of narrative progression, suggest multiple affective and interpretive possibilities that suspend the sequence and logic of causality, and imbue inanimate objects with sensible qualities. The rationale behind this aesthetic energy displayed by seemingly minute, marginal elements could only be understood by going to the source, as it were: the nineteenth-century aesthetic texts that may have shared Victorian experiments with detail, either directly or through cultural osmosis.

The mysterious aesthetic vitality of Victorian literary details fell in place when I went to Rancière’s chief source-text, the most astonishing, comprehensive (and intimidating) text in Western aesthetic philosophy: the *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik* (*Lectures on Aesthetics*, 1835, 1975) by the German idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. It might appear counterintuitive to study Hegel to illuminate Victorian details: Hegel epitomizes the Continental tradition of idealist aesthetics that was viewed with considerable suspicion by nineteenth-century British writers such as John Ruskin (as well as twenty-first century Victorianists); moreover, the extreme totalization and abstraction with which Hegel’s *Aesthetics* is generally identified appears antithetical to Victorian particularity. Yet this view of Hegel is not borne out by the *Aesthetics*, the guiding concern of which is the relation between the particular and the general – as many of Hegel’s Victorian readers were keenly aware. The renowned classicist Benjamin Jowett, one of the leading Hegelians at Oxford (who would go on to influence Wilde’s classicism), claimed in his introduction to *The Dialogues of Plato* (1975) that Hegel “frees the mind from the dominion of abstract ideas,” through his insistence on rendering the dialectical movement of spirit in and through concrete phenomena, which lent itself to

interpretation by way of discourses as diverse as Darwinian evolution theory and the history of aesthetics (413; see *Notebooks* 21).

Hegel identifies the “the opposition of universal and particular,” in its many incarnations, at the core of aesthetics: it “appears in nature as the opposition of the abstract law to the abundance of individual phenomena... in the spirit it appears as the contrast between the sensuous and the spiritual in man... further as the contradiction between the dead inherently empty concept, and the full concreteness of life, between theory or subjective thinking, and objective existence and experience” (1.53-4). He argues that this is a false opposition, for both the absolute/universal and external reality/particular are manifestations of the spirit or will, and instead, traces the trajectory of the embodiment of spirit in sensuous matter across a succession of increasingly particularized art forms.

Hegel defines art as the sensuous embodiment of the “Idea” – the reconciliation of general and particular, subject and object, matter and spirit – as realized in the “Classical” art of Greek sculpture. Broadly speaking, the formal perfection of Greek sculpture entails the lack of detail, for every part is in harmony with the whole. His equation of “art” with ideal beauty has earned him the reputation of the arch-Idealist: Naomi Schor views him as propounding the “ideal of the Ideal” (22). Yet his aesthetics is (in)famously dualistic: even as he praises the perfect reconciliation of form and content in Ideal art, it is the fecund failure of this divide in modern or “Romantic art” (the art of the modern or Christian era), such as modern literature and genre painting that is relevant to the self-analytic culture of modernity. For the very perfection of Classical art entails that spirit is locked in perfect embodiment, and thus cannot advance to the self-conscious subjectivity

that characterizes modernity. Subjectivity, or self-conscious spiritual inwardness, is the province of modern art, and it is aligned with the appearance of extreme external particularity.

The alignment of subjectivity and objectivity in modern art bespeaks the lack of fit between matter and spirit. Spirit, having evolved to a level of consciousness that is beyond the power of a material medium to embody, withdraws into itself in a state of extreme inwardness or “subjectivity,” where inner life is particularized into specific emotions and thoughts: “subjectivity is precisely the inner life, explicit to itself, turned back out of its embodiment in externality into feeling, heart, mind, and meditation” (2.794). This withdrawn and richly particularized inner life in turns frees the “external side of the representation [to be] independent in all its details” (*Aesthetics* 2.793-4). Thus, Hegel reads the extreme profusion of details of external reality in Romantic art as aligned with self-conscious subjectivities. But he does not stop here: in the appearance of objectivity one can see subjectivity reflected:

[O]n account of this relatively increased independence of what is objective and real, the result in most cases is the portrayal of external nature and its separate and most particularized objects, but, in this event, despite all the fidelity of their treatment, there is made obvious in them a reflection of the spirit, because in the manner of their artistic realization they make visible the liveliness of their treatment, the participation of the spirit, *the mind's very indwelling in this uttermost extreme of externality, and therefore an inner and ideal life.*” (*Aesthetics* 2.794, my emphasis).

Hegel finds even – and especially – in the farthest reaches of objectivity and materiality, the diffusion of a rich inner life. Notably, the relation between subjectivity and external details in “Romantic” art is not one of direct expression or correspondence, but is essentially “negative” or contingent. In other words, the self finds no direct embodiment in “Romantic art,” no representation that is adequate to portray its inwardness. Instead, it is indirectly reflected in the very arbitrariness of the juxtapositions between form and content. Through such juxtapositions, subjectivity of the “Romantic” artist – the writer of modern literature, the genre painter – comes to the fore:

[T]he artist's subjective conception and execution of the work of art... can remain faithful both to the manifestations of spirit and also to the inherently substantial life of nature, even in the extreme limits of the contingency which that life reaches, and can make significant even what is in itself without significance, and this it does through this fidelity and through the most marvellous skill of the portrayal (I.596).

The “Romantic” artist uses his “virtuosity” to not only create highly particularized semblances of external nature and of inner states, but also to juxtapose them in a way that, while being essentially arbitrary, *appears* necessary and significant. Thus, virtuosity becomes the impress of the artist’s subjectivity. In literature or “poetry,” virtuosity takes the form of figurative language – metaphor, image, and simile – that juxtapose fields of semblance and of meaning that do not belong together, but are represented with such skill that it becomes impossible for the reader to imagine them being written otherwise (I develop the implications of this insight for our understanding of the poetry of Robert Browning in my second chapter). Poetry, according to the philosopher, is the most

spiritually advanced and conscious art, for it creates semblances at once of external objects and of inner impulses in the spiritual medium of language:

Poetry, to a still ampler extent than painting and music, can comprise in the form of the inner life not only the inner consciousness but also the special and particular details of what exists externally, and at the same time it can portray them separately in the whole expanse of their individual traits and arbitrary peculiarities (2.961).

Poetry creates details in language (“the form of the inner life”) as a form for the minute and deliberate representation of both the objects of the external world, as well as for particularized intuitions, affects, and thoughts.

It is important to note, however, that pictorial and poetic virtuosity inheres in the lack of fit between form and content. In other words, the virtuosic details of modern literature and genre painting need not be directly related to the plot or action of the scene or story: details need not cohere to a specific narrative development or action. Instead of formal beauty, which requires the perfect, direct correspondence between form and content, virtuosity creates “liveliness,” which requires a far looser fit. Benjamin Rutter views “Romantic” liveliness as an arguably more momentous achievement than beauty, for it creates the semblance of animation and significance in what is precisely its opposite: everyday, bourgeois existence. “the modern artist finds echoes of inwardness and depth in trivial situations precisely because, in the skill and energy of his execution, *he puts them there*” (59). Thus, even as virtuosity and liveliness may create the effect of reconciliation, they originate in the lack of fit between form and content – formally

manifested in the virtuosic representation of details for their own sake, without actually cohering to the whole.

This fundamental lack of fit between form and content, realized in the relative autonomy of detail, illuminates nineteenth-century attitudes towards, and aesthetic engagement with the detail, which were guided by the will to mastery over details. This imperative is at the core of the organicism articulated by Romantic writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, whose fantasies of correspondence between form and meaning can be read in relation to their discussion of Hegel's philosophy. In *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4), Carlyle's Diogenes *Teufelsdröckh* satirizes Hegelian philosophy through the figure of a hypothetical thinker who is "President of innumerable Royal Societies, and carrie[s] the whole... *Hegel's Philosophy*... in his single head," but whose lack of inner spiritual vision makes him "a Pair of Spectacles behind which there is no Eye" (60). Accordingly, this figure is unable to look beyond the external form of phenomena (that is, the clothes, in keeping with the central metaphor of *Sartor Resartus*, or *The Tailor Retailored*) to the inner Spirit within. In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle identifies the "seeing eye" – the "faculty of discern[ing] the inner heart of things" – as "the Poet's first gift," and the special capacity of the hero (104-5).

The "faculty of discern[ing] the inner heart of things," is presumed on the idea of a perfect correspondence between form and content, most famously encapsulated in Blake's line: to "see the World in a Grain of Sand." The assumption of this faculty can be viewed as a reaction to, and an attempt to control, the fundamental non-correspondence that Hegel identifies in modern life. Coleridge articulates a similar fantasy of

correspondence in his theory of the symbol, which he explains as "a sign included in the Idea which it represents... an actual represent the whole" (*Aids to Reflection* 263). His central idea about correspondence – "all the organs of spirit are framed for a correspondent world of spirit" (*Biographia Literaria* 1: 242) – is traditionally interpreted by critics as his adherence to German idealist, and specifically Hegelian, ideas of Beauty, the influence of which is indeed evident in Coleridge's formulation: "Beauty = Mind in the form of Life" (*On the Fine Arts* 2:1359; see Simons 472-3). Yet it would be more accurate to identify Coleridge's thought as a partial repudiation of Hegel: in identifying "beauty" in Romantic poetry, Coleridge, like Carlyle, seeks to identify an inherent correlation between form and content, matter and spirit, precisely in the modern literature that Hegel views as fundamentally unreconciled.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Victorian readers of Hegel were becoming more appreciative of the complexities of details, and the fundamental aesthetic disruptions they signified, even as they still held on to the reassuring idea of a correspondence between form and content. G.H. Lewes, whom we encountered in the previous section, was an early reader and reviewer of Hegel's *Aesthetics* in the original German⁷, and his concept of "characteristic detail," where the carefully selected, limited representation of detail can enhance the truth of the situation being depicted, can be read as an attempt to create a new kind of correspondence – embodied in the emergent literary mode of realism – that is based on detail, with their fundamentally irreconciled but richly concrete appearance of objectivity and materiality. This attempt at reconciliation is evident in Lewes's startling claim that realism and idealism tend to the same goal: "A poetical mind sees noble and

⁷ I cover Lewes's connection to Hegel in greater depth in my third chapter on George Eliot.

affecting suggestions in details which the prosaic mind will interpret prosaically. And the true meaning of Idealism is precisely this vision of realities in their highest and most affecting forms” (82). What is remarkable about his configuration is his attempt to transfer the ideal correspondence that Romantic poets envisaged in poetry to the rising genre of prose fiction, and in particular to the profusion of prosaic details in prose. In other words, the very form that signified disruption in Hegel’s aesthetics now embodies the hope for, and means of, creating a new reconciliation between form and content that can encompass the variety of modern life.

Yet the fundamental disruptions of detail mean that any attempt at using them as the basis of the reconciliation of form and content is notable more in its failure than its success. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, details, with their inherent subjective, expressive power that is paradoxically intensified by attempts at suppression, and their formal predisposition to dispersal and diffusion, exceed the bounds of form, and enable the generation of fruitfully unreconciled juxtapositions of form and content. Later nineteenth-century Victorian writers, more cognizant of the elusiveness of details, sought to establish an aesthetics that more fully exploited details’ dynamic lack of fit, by making them into the basis of a modern classical ideal. Writing a decade after Lewes, the young Oscar Wilde – already a formidable scholar of idealist aesthetic philosophy, among other things – independently articulates in philosophical terms a synthesis similar to that between literary realism and idealism outlined by Lewes:

The opposition between Idealism and Realism is a shallow one belonging to the onesided [sic] method of the understanding: Every true philosophy must be both idealist and realist: for without realism a philosophy would be void of substance

and matter without idealism it wd. be void of form and truth: Realism is the assertion of the claims of the ~~univer~~ particular, the detail, the parts: Idealism is the grasp of the whole and the universal (“Commonplace Book,” *Notebooks* 127).

The details of “Realism,” by this account, are the material manifestations of the higher spiritual truths grasped by “Idealism.” Wilde thus attempts to envisage details as directly embodying the aesthetic ideals of spiritual truth and formal perfection. a philosophical reconciliation of systems that will serve as the basis of his art. Yet he is also aware of the ultimate impossibility of this attempted reconciliation in modern art, as we see in another paraphrase of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*:

Modern art appeals directly to the emotions, aims at reaching the spiritual reality of things, cares more for feelings than for form – Greek art remains on the surface and translates into ideal the humanized aspects of the external world
(“Commonplace Book,” *Notebooks* 139).⁸

Wilde directly relates the loss of formal perfection in modern art with its greater emotional impact and content. He would later seek to recreate the ideal for modern times in the movement that came to be known as Aestheticism – a literary mode that creates ideal forms that are based on the intense, shifting and varied emotions of everyday life. In his dialogue “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde’s speaker Vivian argues that the “object of Art,” which is “not simple truth but complex beauty,” created through the careful selection of the raw matter of Life, for “selection, which is the very spirit of art” (174).

Yet Wilde’s Aestheticism is based on a paradox, for the emotions and experiences of life

⁸ Philip E. Smith and Michael S. Helfand trace the influence of Hegel’s *Aesthetics* in Wilde’s Oxford notebooks, and attribute Wilde’s knowledge of Hegel to his reading of Pater’s analysis of Hegel’s *Aesthetics* in his essay on “Winckelmann,” among other sources (I discuss the Hegelian engagements of Pater and Wilde in my final chapter).

frustrate the composition of ideal form. resolution of a kind is only created when Wilde takes the details of life itself – translated into the highly aestheticized descriptions of beautiful objects, as well as the sensations roused by those objects – as the new, ideal wholes. The details take over the whole, and the appearance of truth that details effect becomes the ultimate instantiation of the “complex beauty” of art.

III. Chapters

Using details as an Ariadne’s thread, I trace the mutually constitutive dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity through two major nineteenth-century movements usually viewed in opposition: realism and Aestheticism. I begin with the writings of John Ruskin because he stands at the head of both traditions, before tracking his complicated legacy in the works of Robert Browning, George Eliot, and Oscar Wilde. Ruskin’s insistent advocacy of the details of Gothic architecture as representative of subjective creativity and mimetic truth precipitates the broader cultural shift towards the inclusion and aestheticization of previously unaesthetic details that is realized when details themselves become part of Wilde’s Aesthetic ideal.

In my first chapter, “Details in John Ruskin’s Gothic Aesthetics,” I investigate how John Ruskin audaciously champions the grotesque and irregular details of Gothic architecture as expressing the artisan’s free subjectivity, in his seminal architectural treatise *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3). In the process, as has often been recognized, he challenges prevalent aesthetic norms of accuracy, symmetry, and harmony that were the legacy of neoclassical artists such as Joshua Reynolds, who equated the still harmony and perfection of Classical art with ideals of “general truth.” Ruskin’s challenge to Reynolds is an early Victorian manifestation of the breakdown of the classical representation order

under the “aesthetic regime of art,” which locates ideas of artistic creativity and subjective expression in irregular, asymmetrical forms, such as details, precisely by virtue of their violation of classical symmetries. This disruptiveness proceeds along complex, qualified lines in Ruskin’s work: even as he ‘emancipates’ details as individual entities that express the Gothic artisan’s free subjectivity, he nevertheless seeks to contain their power amid broader ideal of “truth of nature,” as well as the overall shape of the buildings they comprise. Thus, he configures Gothic buildings in paradoxical terms, as irregular wholes that are constantly threatened by their constituent details – the disruptive energy of which is, if anything, heightened by attempts at containment. The dialectic of expression and containment gives form to Ruskin’s own susceptibility to the sensuous, autonomous pleasures of details. In details, Ruskin finds a seemingly objective mode in which he can suppress his subjectivity, but which – establishing a pattern for the writers that follow – paradoxically generates and intensifies the subjectivity in the process of suppressing it.

While Ruskin’s realist details pulsate within and against the broader notions of truth and order that he imposes on them, Robert Browning paradoxically employs Ruskin’s insights to ‘emancipate’ details from all attempts at containment. In my second chapter, “Stopped Leaks and Littlenesses: Details in the Poetry of Robert Browning,” I argue that through his grotesque proliferation of details, Browning exaggerates the mutually constitutive dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity that details embody: he demonstrates the most seemingly objective details of situation and setting to be the creation of highly active and imaginative subjectivities. In the process, he employs details to expose and interrogate the subjectivities of his speakers. His details obscure what they

elaborate, by incarnating multiple, contradictory perspectives and formal techniques and multiple interpretations. Browning thus represents details, the supposed signifiers of historical truth, as sites of live ambiguity where the divide between fact and fiction, subjectivity and objectivity, is blurred.

Arguments about the force of details have had their most extensive presence in the novel, a form the narrative drives of which have sometimes been taken to be antithetical to the narrative stasis associated with detail and description. The second half of my dissertation consists of the analysis of two novels, representative of the two strands I have been following throughout the project: the realist and the Aesthetic. In my third chapter, “‘Dwell on every detail and its possible meaning’: George Eliot’s Subjective Details,” I argue that in *Middlemarch* (1871-2) – a canonical realist text frequently associated with epistemic and ethical seriousness – George Eliot dramatizes a surprising failure of clarity at the moment of closest engagement with the detail. The imperative to “dwell on every detail and its possible meaning” emerges in the course of an epiphany on the part of Dorothea Brooke, the mistaken nature of which renders her *Bildung* a highly limited and contingent process. Eliot’s perverse dramatization of failed insight brings together two seemingly opposed philosophical approaches that shape the history of the detail in the nineteenth century: empiricism and idealism. While the empirical Eliot is relatively well-known, and evidently participates in a characteristically British tendency that makes immediate sense when thinking about the novels of this great realist, my dissertation gives new attention to the force of idealism in her thought. That Dorothea’s scrupulous engagement with details is shaped by her subjective misperceptions, and results in a subjective epiphany built on an objective error of interpretation, allows us to

read character insight and detail not as ratifying a clear and readily available reality, but as putting into a generative relationship objective reality and subjective perception.

The perversely playful aspects of the idea that the details that effect the appearance of reality are creations of, and in turn create, subjectivity, is realized by Oscar Wilde in his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). In my final chapter, “The Dissolute Details of Aestheticism,” I examine how Wilde dissolves the boundary between the subject and the object, through his sensuous, diffusive descriptions of art objects in which his protagonist, Dorian, pleasurably immerses and undoes his sense of self. I trace Wilde’s use of descriptions to the famously subtle and diffuse modes of subjectivity envisaged by his closest Aesthetic forbear, Walter Pater, who urges the constitution and reconstitution of oneself through the realization of exquisite experiences and sensations as perfect forms. Wilde dramatizes this process of aesthetic self-creation as the perceptual self-creation and self-dissolution in melting details of mood, color, and light, which become images of experiential flux and dissolution. This mutual interchange between subjectivity and objectivity, where both entities are in flux, forms the content of the novel: Dorian’s experience of pleasure is represented as a mode of self-dissolution into the details of his rich possessions, and in the end he is famously subsumed into his portrait. By characterizing lived experience as comprising the ‘carving’ of exquisite moments of experience as perfect forms, Wilde’s aestheticism consummates the idea embedded in Ruskin’s realism: that the representation of everyday life, with its innumerable, evanescent, and multiple affective and interpretive possibilities, is the fundamental aesthetic project.

Details embody the aestheticization of everyday life that is at the core of the modern category of aesthetics as the designation of an autonomous realm of sensible experience. My project posits that the Victorians conceptualized the constitutive disruptions of aesthetics as opportunities for the generation and reconfiguration of subjectivity. Victorian writers represent the suspension of the divide between art and life at the core of aesthetic modernity as a mode of perceptual self-creation, where the self constitutes itself and inheres and the details it carves. As details are not constrained by narrative concerns, they represented a means of envisaging audacious modes of subjectivity. In its capacity to imbue every moment of everyday life with intense passions, the Victorian representation of subjectivity is the aesthetic invention *par excellence*.

Details in John Ruskin's Gothic Aesthetics

In 1900, thirteen years before he commenced on building a literary edifice that would embody his narrative conception of time, Marcel Proust stood before the Portal of the Booksellers at Rouen Cathedral, scanning it for “a single figure, a few inches high” amid a “superhuman multitude” of similar carved figures (108). As he contemplated his onerous task, he would have recalled John Ruskin's disquisition on the unprepossessing gnomish figure that had inspired Proust's self-entitled “Ruskinian Pilgrimage” to Rouen:

[T]here is a little touch above the hand especially well meant: the fellow is vexed and puzzled in his malice; and his hand is pressed hard on his cheekbone, and the flesh of the cheek is *wrinkled* under the eye by the pressure. The whole, indeed, looks wretchedly coarse... but considering it as a mere filling of an interstice on the outside of a cathedral gate and as one of more than three hundred [figures]... it proves very noble vitality in the art of the time (Ruskin 8.217, cited in Proust 107; original emphasis).

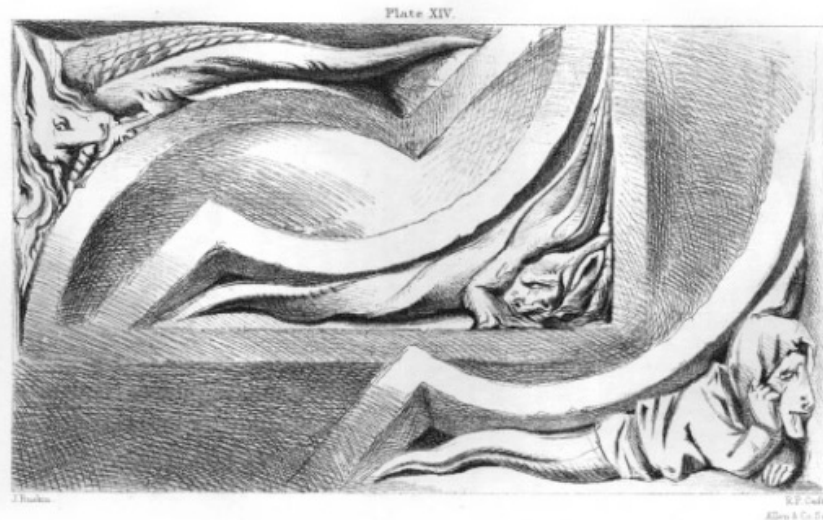


Fig. 1. Plate XIV. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (illustration by John Ruskin)

The figure in question is in the bottom right corner, sequestered in its brooding isolation.

Ruskin's argument that the unprepossessing little figure, "coarse" when viewed as a whole, nevertheless embodies the "vitality" of Gothic architecture when viewed as part of a single cathedral gate, exemplifies his consistently doubled characterization of details as distinct, individual entities that yet fit within a larger purpose. His doubled conception of detail is the basis of his vindication of Gothic art, where individual irregular parts come together to harmoniously comprise an organic totality that is more vital than the artificial symmetries of neoclassicism. Ruskin's idea of a totality has been largely accepted by his critics: even as groundbreaking a thinker as Jacques Rancière argues that Ruskin's Gothic artisan "expresses his own will, and his singular manner" by "subordinating himself to the collective work" (142). However, such readings of reconciliation between part and whole overlook a key paradox: Ruskin reads the artisan's freedom and "happ[iness]" in a figure that is barely contained in its niche, and that is visibly "vexed" at being so narrowly confined. The figure's emotional tension makes visible its formal tension as a part that threatens to exceed its designated place within a whole. Details, once recognized as aesthetic wholes, are not so easily contained: in fact, their expressive power is paradoxically heightened by attempts at containment. I suggest that the formal indeterminacy of Ruskin's conception of detail – exemplified in the way the figure does *not* fit into the whole it comprises – is a characteristic manifestation of the "vitality" of his Gothic aesthetic, where wholes, be they elements of buildings, entire buildings, or the concept of the Gothic itself, are at once threatened and rendered animate by the insubordination of their constituent parts. It is the exacerbation of this indeterminacy that spurs and shapes Ruskin's practice as a writer, as he describes each of the constituent

parts of figure as a whole in its own right: hand, cheek, and finally its “*wrinkle*,” through the italicization of which Ruskin creates a textual “*wrinkle*” that recreates the sculptural one he perceives. Ruskin’s uncovering of repeated ambiguities highlights that details are created, not made: that he is not describing a given term, but using his words to delineate a detail where its presence is not necessarily self-evident.

Ruskin’s characterization of details in terms of indeterminacy realizes the contradictions underlying the detail itself as an aesthetic category. That Ruskin writes in detail on details of art and architecture is a critical commonplace. When George Landow notes Ruskin’s “precise statements about the specifics of architectural style,” and that Ruskin “wrote in detail” on “the actual appearance of buildings,” he conflates two inextricably entwined but fundamentally distinct kinds of detail: the architectural details that Ruskin observes, and the stylistic details of his writing through which he represents those architectural details for his readers (211-2). This conflation is traceable to a wider critical tendency to view detail as a self-evident entity, synonymous with fragmentariness and marginality, whose supposedly manifest visual nature translates into unproblematic and objective verbal representation. However, Ruskin’s scrupulous notes from his time in Venice reveal that details, far from being given entities, are constructed by perceiving subjects through processes of selection and analysis, so that seemingly objective details are inseparable from subjective values and affects, thereby casting in doubt the divide between subjectivity and objectivity. His Venetian Notebooks, currently at the Ruskin Library at Lancaster University, reveal his meticulous yet idiosyncratic use of language to *carve* details in ways that attempt to manage a fluctuating and mutually constitutive

relationship between parts and wholes.¹ In his notes, his attention to details is richly inflected with uncertainty regarding where a detail begins and ends, effusions of delight at detecting multiple styles intermingled within a single detail, and of bemusement at “ill-cut” details whose subject remains obscure (*Bit Book* 64L/19w). Ruskin’s attempts in his larger Diaries to excise the element of subjectivity by seeking to compose the idiosyncratic details in his Notebooks in art-historical narratives that are responsive to their multiform nature and beauty, paradoxically strengthens their expressive power and claims to autonomy, as they at once determine, and threaten take over, the way he conceptualizes wholes. To read his Notebooks and Diaries alongside *Stones of Venice* text is to witness the gradual construction of a massive and elaborate verbal Gothic edifice that is composed of, and governed by, its constituent stylistic details.

In this chapter, I argue that Ruskin’s engagement with the formal indeterminacies of details is central to his configuration of the Gothic as an aesthetic that at once comprises, and seeks to contain, its concrete, irregular, and individually unique constituent details. It is in the contradictions – and the ultimate impossibility – of this formulation that the animation of Ruskin’s Gothic inheres. I trace Ruskin’s attempts to negotiate the mutually constitutive relationship between parts and wholes, and thus between the self and the world, in his writings on the visual details of landscape art and the stone details of Gothic architecture in the 1840s and 1850s. In my first section, I

¹ The writer expresses her gratitude to the Director and staff of the Ruskin Library and Research Center: Professor Stephen Wildman (Director and Curator), Ms. Rebecca Patterson (Curator), Ms. Diane Tyler (Assistant Curator) and Ms. Jen Shepherd (Secretary) for their expertise and generosity. The writer is also indebted to Mr. Colin Harris of the Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford, for facilitating her research. Also invaluable are the online transcriptions and facsimiles of Ruskin’s Venetian Notebooks at the website of the Ruskin Library at Lancaster University, by the research team of Ian Bliss, Roger Garside, Ray Haslam, with Sarah Quill as consultant
<<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/ruskinlib/eSoV/notes/toplevel.html>>

examine Ruskin's attempts to negotiate this dialectic in his early work *Modern Painters I* (1843), where he attempts to revise the neoclassical paradigm of ideal beauty, which entails the excision of details, by insisting on including details that represent the truth of nature – albeit in such selected and limited terms that highlight the perceiving activity of the artist. In my second and third sections, I trace the intensification of this dialectic in Ruskin's architectural treatises, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), as well as his extensive architectural notes, and seek to examine how Ruskin's details at once embody and revise broader discourses on the relation between parts and wholes in contemporary aesthetic philosophy. In my final section, I examine how in his seminal chapter "The Nature of Gothic" (*The Stones of Venice II*, 1853), Ruskin conceptualizes "Gothicness" as an abstract category that characterizes the "stately and unaccusable whole[s]" (10.190) of Gothic buildings, but that paradoxically only exists in the variegated, irregular, formally ambiguous, and stylistically diverse details that both comprise and threaten to destabilize the buildings. Formally, this argument proceeds through an elaborate and precise efflorescence of digressions and debates – themselves parts in the larger scheme of his argument that ultimately take over his argument. This elaborate explosion of "Gothicness" consummates the implicit subjectivity of his creation of details, which is paradoxically generated and energized by his attempts at suppression, and which find form in the insubordinate and overwhelming details of the Gothic that take over the whole.

More broadly, my focus on Ruskin's details is motivated by the desire to rehabilitate the detail as a central category in nineteenth-century aesthetics; Ruskin's Gothic details inaugurate a particularly sophisticated Victorian tradition of aesthetics.

Ruskin's own place within a broader aesthetic tradition is largely neglected² because of his suspicion – widely shared among British writers – of Continental aesthetic philosophy, which he equated with the amoral and dreamily detached pursuit of beauty for its own sake. Yet his concern with the ambiguity of details addresses the divide that is at the core of aesthetic philosophy, which the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel identifies, in abstract terms, as “the opposition of universal and particular,” which “appears in nature as the opposition of the abstract law to the abundance of individual phenomena... in the spirit it appears as the contrast between the sensuous and the spiritual in man... further as the contradiction between the dead inherently empty concept, and the full concreteness of life, between theory or subjective thinking, and objective existence and experience” (1.53-4). While “Ideal” or Classical art embodies the reconciliation of this divide, it is the “failure” of the modern or “Romantic” art of the Christian era, of which Gothic architecture is an instance,³ that is relevant to the self-conscious spirit of modernity. In this scenario, Ruskin's characterization of the animate, formally imperfect details of Gothic architecture, exemplifies the relation between aesthetic imperfection and modern subjectivity that is at the core of aesthetics.

The Specific Details of *Modern Painters*

In *Modern Painters I*, Ruskin challenges the prohibition of detail in art that was the legacy of eighteenth-century neoclassicism, which emphasized the abstraction of ideal form by excising the particulars of nature. The key figure in the English

² An exception is Mark Swenarton's *Artisans and Architects: The Ruskinian Tradition in Architectural Thought* (Springer, 1988) which includes an invaluable survey of the identification of Gothic with an ideal of Christian art in the German Romantic writing (pp. 5-10).

³ As we shall see in the section on architecture, Gothic architecture is a complicated instance of the “Romantic” art: Hegel himself views as a manifestation of the self-conscious modern “Romantic” spirit in the “Symbolic art” of architecture. I link the paradoxes of this configuration to the threateningly alive details that Hegel (and, of course, Ruskin) identify in Gothic architecture.

neoclassical tradition is the artist and theorist Sir Joshua Reynolds, who in his *Discourses* argues “the whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists... in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind” (“Third Discourse” 41). Reynolds distinguishes what he views as the slavish imitation of nature – the province of unthinking, mechanical working-class artisans – from the intellectual labor of art, which requires the abstraction of an ideal form through the excision of particularities that anchor that form in a specific time and place. This latter endeavor is the province of the gentleman artist of “Genius,” who must “distinguish the accidental deficiencies, excrescences and deformities of things from their general figures,” thereby extracting “an abstract idea of their forms more perfect than any one original” (41). However, Reynolds’s pathologization of natural details stems from an awareness of dependence: as artists must seek “ideal perfection and beauty... upon the earth,” they must learn to meticulously study and render natural objects, if only to identify the individual peculiarities (which Reynolds terms “deformities”) they must excise. By his own admission, he establishes a “paradox” of Nature as an artistic ideal, which is unlike any object actually found in nature: the artist “learns to design naturally by drawing his figures unlike to any one object ... correct[ing] Nature by herself, her imperfect state by her more perfect” (41). In practical terms, this paradoxical Ideal of nature plays out in the rigorous observation of natural details by the artist, if only to ultimately excise them.

In *Modern Painters I*, Ruskin challenge Reynolds’s “Ideal” of Nature by engaging with its complexity. Instead of discarding the Ideal altogether, Ruskin expands it to include a degree of natural details that Reynolds prohibits from representation – while nevertheless prohibiting a more minute degree of natural detail. Thus, Ruskin argues in

his second Preface to *Modern Painters I* that the insistence of “Sir J. Reynolds and other scientific writers” – namely, that “general truths are more important than particular ones” – is a misapplication of the idea of truth as it pertains to art: “Generalized! As if it were possible to generalize things generically different... It is just as impossible to generalize granite and slate, as it is to generalize a man and a cow” (3.34). Instead, he particularizes Reynolds’s “Ideal” by locating it in the variety of nature, arguing “there is an ideal form of every herb, flower, and tree” that the artist must learn to render through the careful study of nature (3.27). To reconcile the eternal verities of form with the variable minutiae of nature, Ruskin identifies his ideal with “specific character” – the intrinsic qualities that shared among all individuals of a given species of object:

Every herb and flower of the field has its specific, distinct, and perfect beauty; it has its peculiar habitation, expression, and function. The highest art is that which seizes this specific character, which develops and illustrates it, which assigns to it its proper position in the landscape, and which, by means of it, enhances and enforces the great impression which the picture is intended to convey (3.33).

Ruskin’s idea of “specific character” exemplifies the extent and the limits of his revaluation of neoclassical paradigms. He ushers into representation a degree of natural detail that he deems vital to the illustration of “specific character,” or of characteristics common to all the individuals of the species or type being represented. Conversely, he prohibits a further degree of detail that differentiates *between individual specimens* of the same species:

The qualities and properties which characterize man or any other animal as a species, are the perfection of his or its form and mind, almost all individual

differences arising from imperfections; hence a truth of species is the more valuable to art, because it must always be a beauty, while a truth of individuals is commonly, in some sort of way, a defect (3.153).

Ruskin identifies specific character with the truth of nature, the representation which is the goal of art, and the basis of a painting's harmony and purpose. To grasp and portray specific character becomes the aim of the artist, and the test of "greatness" in art. In a statement that curiously reflects Reynolds's strictures on "Genius" in art, Ruskin claims that artistic "greatness" "chiefly consists in seizing the specific character of the object... while utterly reject[ing] the meaner beauties which are accidentally peculiar to the object" (3.33). Thus, Ruskin makes the selection of details as the measure of the artist, and the mark of his personal creativity. In selecting details in keeping with the object's specific character, and in representing them in a way that enhances the artistic unity of the painting as a whole, the artist expresses his creative subjectivity.

Ruskin's identification of artistic creativity with the selective representation of natural details to portray specific character is the result of a congruence between two key influences on his early work – Romanticism and empiricism, both of which emphasize the selective engagement with details as an expression of the mind's shaping activity. This idea is implicit in a seminal text usually associated with empiricism – John Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which Ruskin read before writing *Modern Painters I*. As his editors Edward T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn note, Ruskin's idea of "specific character" draws on Locke's memorable distinction between "primary qualities" such as "bulk, figure, situation, and motion or rest of solid parts," which are intrinsic to all objects of a specific class "whether we perceive them or no,"

and “secondary qualities” – such as color – which are “*powers* of producing on other objects, or in us, certain effects and sensations” (3.158). Locke’s distinction is usually responsible for the identification of classical empiricism with pure impressions or sensations; Robert Hewison reads the influence of eighteenth-century empiricist discourses on what he terms Ruskin’s determinedly “non-speculative” approach to the observation of natural details. However, Locke’s idea of the mind is dual in nature: his claim that the mind functions initially as a camera obscura or “*dark room*” that passively receives immediate sense impressions is followed by that of the mind actively selecting, abstracting, and recombining those impressions to form ideas:

The senses first let in particular ideas, and furnish the yet empty cabinet [the mind] ... afterwards, the mind, proceeding further, abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names” (I.142).

Empirical perception is thus the first step to the mind’s “abstracting” activity, by which it forms concepts and categories by distinguishing intrinsic qualities, shared by all the objects of a class, from details peculiar to individual specimens. Locke’s layered conception of the mind has a dual legacy: while his analysis of the passive sensitivity of the mind influenced materialists, his argument of the active capacities of the mind influenced the skepticism of Berkeley and Hume, and through the latter, the idealist philosophy of Kant and by extension, German idealism and its British Romantic followers (I will discuss German idealism and aesthetic philosophy later in the context of the Ruskin’s Gothic in the next section). In this context, the fact that Ruskin is influenced by both Lockean empiricism and Romantic ideas of subjectivity, as evinced in his

insistence on the careful observation of natural details that yet reveal the shaping activity of a subject (as we shall see below), is less contradictory than they might appear.

That Ruskin employs the empirical category of “specific character” as an aesthetic goal attests to the influence of the Romantic particularization of the ideal by writers such as William Hazlitt, who drew on his particular understanding of empiricism to reconceive Reynolds’s neoclassical ideal as a balance between abstract form and the selected particulars of nature. Specifically, Hazlitt draws on Locke’s idea of “abstraction”; however, unlike Locke, who viewed abstraction as a mental process that is distinct from, and follows, sense-perception (with the mind organizing the sense impressions it has received), Hazlitt views abstraction as inseparable from perception, so that “any abstract idea or concept is never entirely abstract nor entirely particularized, but a balance between the two” (Natarajan “Hazlitt 493). In his essay on Joshua Reynolds, Hazlitt translates this particularized ideal as a balance between parts and the whole: “that grace and grandeur and unity of effect which Sir Joshua supposes to be a mere creation of the artist's brain” can only be attained “by seeking and finding in individual nature, and combined with details of every kind!” (325). The goal of the artist, and the expression of his individual creativity, lies in the attainment of this balance between part and whole through the abstraction of natural details: “real excellence consist[s] in the power of generalising and of individualising at the same time... by seeking and finding in individual nature, and combined with details of every kind, that grace and grandeur and unity of effect” (323).

In Hazlitt’s particularized ideal, details are not only compatible with the ideal, but are essential to its grandeur of effect, by lending it substance and solidity and increasing

its resemblance to the natural object: “the introduction of the internal parts and texture only added delicacy and truth to the general and striking effect of the whole” (132).

Hazlitt is particularly inspired by the Elgin Marbles, which “give a flat contradiction to this gratuitous separation of grandeur of design and exactness of detail, as incompatible in works of art” (214). Of the fragment of the River-God Ilussus, he writes:

[T]he swell and undulation of the calf, the inter-texture of the muscles, the distinction and union of all the parts, and the effect of action everywhere impressed on the external form, as if the very marble were a flexible substance, and contained the various springs of life and motion within itself [show] that art and nature are here the same thing (“Ilussus” 312).

Hazlitt delineates what Uttara Natarajan terms a “symbiotic” relationship between the part and the whole, where the lushness and precision of individual anatomical details reinforce their mutual interconnection and formation of the unity and animation of the leg as a whole. His own writing performs this symbiosis between part and whole: beginning with the distinct carving of the “swell and undulation” of the calf, Hazlitt moves on to the “inter-texture” connecting the various muscles, which reinforces both the “distinction and union” of the parts and casts on this marble fragment the cast of animation. The mutually constitutive interplay between part and whole that Hazlitt perceives in the fragment, and that shapes the details of his own writing, exemplifies his revision of Reynolds’s ideal: not one obtained by the excision of natural details, but through the careful selection of natural details to achieve a broader unity of effect. It is strikingly congruent with Ruskin’s declaration that “details perfect in unity, and contributing to a final purpose, are the sign of the production of a consummate master” (3.32). While Ruskin himself

discounts Hazlitt's "correct and classical criticism" (3.350), Hazlitt is the Romantic link between Reynolds's neoclassicism and Ruskin's realism. It is Hazlitt who equates the selection and abstraction of details into a particularized ideal as the mark of an artist's personal creativity.

Ruskin's specific character differs from Hazlitt's particularized ideal, however, on a key point: where Hazlitt stresses the "abstraction" of details, Ruskin places a relatively heightened emphasis on the "particularization" of details. In *Modern Painters I*, Ruskin credits Romantic poets and their Elizabethan inspiration, Shakespeare, for bringing aesthetic perceptibility and prominence to details usually relegated to the background of paintings: "the particularization of flowers by Shakspeare [sic] and Shelley" "affords us the most frequent examples of the exalted use of these inferior details" (3.37).

"Particularization" entails that the artist or poet perceives details of nature with empirical fidelity, as key forms in their own right, and represents them as "vehicles of expression and emotion" (3.36). Ruskin essentially develops the particularization that Hazlitt himself introduces into the ideal when he refigured it as a balance between wholeness and details: Ruskin tilts the balance, as it were, towards details, by placing them at the center of representation, around which ideas of aesthetic unity and wholeness are reconfigured.

In rendering the ideal more particularized, however, Ruskin also renders it more personal: he reconceives the ideal in terms of the subjective, emotional significance that the artist infuses in the detail. Simultaneously, however, his retention of idealism, even on such particularized and personal terms, entails that his "particularization" remains qualified: he enjoins the representation of details not for their own sake, but as agents of

emotional truths and personal histories. Thus, he distinguishes the poet or painter from the botanist, who observes details empirically, for their own sake:

[T]he [botanist] counts the stamens, and affixes a name, and is content; the [painter or poet] observes every character of the plant's colour and form... as an element of expression... he associates it in his mind with all the features of the situations it inhabits, and the ministering agencies necessary to its support.

Thence-forward the flower is to him a living creature, with histories written on its leaves, and passions breathing in its motion (3.36-7).

Ruskin's key word – “associate” – recalls the influential eighteenth-century discourse of associationism, which traces the experience of beauty to “associations our mind has learned to make in response to a particular visual scene (or poetic image, or any mental stimulus)” (Teukolsky 49). Famously associated with Romantic poetry, associationism is refigured by Ruskin to conceptualize the specific combination of the personal and the particular that his process of “particularization” entails: the painter or poet may only select and represent those natural details that in which he perceives the deeper truths of specific character, making them amenable to being imbued with his own personal truths. Conversely, the poet or painter must neglect details that differentiate between individual specimens, and do not convey “truths of species.” Thus, Ruskin conceptualizes the selection and representation of “specific” details – and the prohibition of individuating details – as the measure of the artist, and the expression of his subjectivity.

However, Ruskin's location of the personal in the particular complicates his attempted prohibition of individuating details. If the selection and representation of specific details is the mark of the artist's conscious subjectivity and creative choice,

subjectivity is paradoxically even more strongly present in the hyper-particular details Ruskin seeks to banish from presentation – which he accomplishes in such personal, passionate terms as to include them verbally. This ostentatious prohibition is evident in his 1844 Preface to *Modern Painters I*, where he seeks to distinguish details of “specific character” from charges of slavish minuteness and pettiness, by equating these qualities with “mere portraiture of inanimate substances, Denner-like portraiture of the earth’s face” (1.32).⁴ The “slavishly mimetic” portraiture of the early eighteenth-century German artist Balthasar Denner, infamously dubbed *Poren-Denner*, had become something of a byword in the early nineteenth-century for the mindless and minute imitation of nature – pores, warts, and all (Schor 23). Ruskin deems “Denner-like portraiture” “the lowest and most contemptible art,” for it consists of details “represented for their own sake,” without being subordinated to the representation of a broader, unified artistic goal (3.32). In contrast, he claims that in the representation of specific character we find “detail referred to a great end, sought for the sake of the inestimable beauty which exists in the slightest and least of God’s works, and treated in a manly, broad, and impressive manner” (3.32). Remarkably, Ruskin’s account of details represented for their own sake transforms the slavish imitation of nature into a dangerously autonomous and self-indulgent mode of representation. However, his ostentatious denigration of details represented “for their own sake” is complicated by his undeniable fascination towards these contingent, individuating details, which he paradoxically describes in great minuteness and fidelity *in the act of banishing them from representation*. Contrast Ruskin’s detailing of

⁴ The “slavishly mimetic” portraiture of the early eighteenth-century German artist Balthasar Denner, infamously dubbed *Poren-Denner*, had become something of a byword in the early nineteenth-century for the mindless and minute imitation of nature – pores, warts, and all (see Schor 23).

individuating details with Reynolds's terse "accidental deficiencies, excrescences and deformities":

Denner-like portraiture would be the endeavour to paint the separate crystals of quartz and felspar in the granite, and the separate flakes of mica in the mica slate; an attempt just as far removed from what I assert to be great art (the bold rendering of the generic characters of form in both rocks), as modern sculpture of lace and buttonholes is from the Elgin marbles (3.36).

Ruskin's ostentatious inclusion of the details he would limit or banish from representation for their extreme individuality, idiosyncrasy, and contingency, is an instance of *praeteritio* – the rhetorical inclusion of excluded things by mentioning them. In the progressively more particularized list above, Ruskin permits himself to imagine, in the subjunctive mode, the hyper-particular details that his ideal modern landscape artist *would have painted* if he had been the myopic, detail-crazed figure Ruskin's critics made him out to be. Ironically, by creating this little fantasy, Ruskin himself momentarily becomes that artist. In the infinitesimal space of details that are too minute and multifarious to be subdued to a higher aesthetic purpose, and that are safely distanced through the imagined activity of a proscribed artist, Ruskin finds the freedom to re-create himself as a powerful, perceiving subject that is diffused in the counterfactual details he imagines as *not included* in his idealized landscape.

To view the powerful forming presence of subjectivity in Ruskin's seemingly objective verbal details might appear perverse, but Ruskin himself clarifies the connection between extreme objectivity and extreme subjectivity. To delight in "detail for its own sake" is the primary visual trait of the intensely imaginative and indulgent

child: “Infants in judgment... we delight in the faithful plumage of the well-known bird, in the finely drawn leafage of the discriminated flower” (3.31). This delight, however, is not the sign of juvenile imbecility, but of the innate wisdom of the Romantic child, which is slowly lost with age: “As we advance in judgment, we scorn such detail altogether; we look for impetuosity of execution, and breadth of effect” (3.31). The chilling onset of maturity also plays out in the artist’s career: while the apprentice artist dedicates himself to the portrayal of detail, the mature artist, as per Reynolds’s injunctions, “looks with... contempt on those who see minutiae of detail *rather* than grandeur of impression” and “so often... dash[es] delicacy out of the pupil’s work... blot[s] the details from his encumbered canvas (3.32). It is only with further maturity, when the individual is “perfected in judgment,” that “we return in a great measure to our early feelings, and thank Raffaele for the shells upon his sacred beach, and for the delicate stamens of the herbage beside his inspired St. Catherine” (3.32). Yet this return is not a complete reversion to the infant love of detail, but a knowing return, whereby the individual appreciates detail in keeping with detail’s subordination to a higher goal of illustrating specific character. While “details alone, and unREFERRED to a final purpose, are the sign of a tyro’s work,” Ruskin claims that “details perfect in unity, and contributing to a final purpose, are the sign of the production of a consummate master” (3.32), as we have seen. This distinction enables Ruskin to try to have it both ways, as it were: to indulge in detail to a degree, while distancing further details.

The degree, and the limits, of Ruskin’s defense of detail is evident in his evaluation of Titian’s *Bacchus and Ariadne*: even as he eulogizes the specific depiction of “the wild rose, *every stamen* of which is given,” he also praises what he sees as

Titian's avoidance of those "accidental" details that are not necessary to render the "truth" of the flower: "there is no vestige of particular texture, of moss, bloom, moisture, or any other accident... nothing beyond the simple forms and hues of the flowers" (3.29).⁵ Ruskin's abjuration of contingent details appears to reproduce, in less extreme form, Reynolds' proscription of particularities of time and space. Yet by explicitly naming what Titian does not depict, Ruskin conspicuously reintroduces in his word-painting what he would expel from landscape painting, at once indulging in and distancing his fascination with details.

Ruskin's contradictory insistence on a degree of natural detail, and his fascinated, ostentatious exclusion of further details, enacts the contradictory interplay of intimacy and distance that characterizes his uncomfortable engagement with his own intense visual self. In a letter to Isola Cowper-Temple, Ruskin describes his overpowering visual desires: "The worst of me is that the Desire of the Eyes is so much to me! Ever so more than the desire of the mind" (16 January, 1875; 37.152-3). His confession affords a glimpse of his powerful, desiring visual subjectivity which spurs and shapes his perception of landscape as well as of beautiful women. His engagement with landscape and (later) Gothic architecture is shaped by his need to indulge in visual desires in a manner that yet permits the cover of objectivity. Jay Fellows argues that Ruskin, possessed of a powerful sense of self but fearing to lapse into egocentrism and

⁵ Ruskin's choice of Titian and Raphael are notable, and part of his revaluation of prevalent artistic canons through the discovery of painstaking attention to detail in Italian Renaissance paintings that were viewed as the epitome of idealism (see Yeazell 110-12 on the distinction, still powerful in the nineteenth century, between "idealized" and "poetic" Italian painting, and Dutch painting, with its attention to the humble details of everyday life). Titian's own position is peculiar, however: his alignment with the Venetian school, with its brilliant use of color to convey spectacular and fleeting effects (rather than the linear style of the Florentine school), aligns with the fleeting details of color and light. Thus, Ruskin uses Titian's painting as an instance of an art that admits a relative degree of detail while banishing further details – while inadvertently revealing his own fascination with the latter.

autobiography, seeks a visual affiliation with the world across a distance that permits the semblance of objectivity that comes with the loss of self: “[Ruskin] wants a highly visible and memorable landscape to be perceived by an invisible and forgotten optical self... a selfless world, a world large enough to either hide himself or lose himself” (2). I would argue, however, that this loss of self might be read as amounting to its opposite: it is not so much a vanishing as it is a disappearance of the self *into* the perceived object, which, while remaining an external object, also becomes an externalization of Ruskin’s desires. Fellows perceptively identifies the landscapes Ruskin creates as oblique autobiographies that objectify Ruskin’s desires: “the kind of world Ruskin inhabits is dependent upon the staring self’s optical equipment, its affective requirements and antipathies: the topography that Ruskin is attracted to, and that he constructs in verbal miniatures, is dictated by his means of apprehension” (24). If, as Fellows argues, Ruskin’s descriptions of landscape are an oblique form of autobiography, then their details represent the pressing of this dialectic to its limits: the appearance of extreme objectivity, generated and enlivened by Ruskin’s intensely desiring subjectivity.

Ruskin’s attempted submergence of the self in a vision of objective details nevertheless reproduces the problem of self-consciousness it is intended to avert. Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston argue that the nineteenth-century pursuit of objectivity as an epistemic and moral virtue is inseparable from the increasing awareness of subjectivity as a distorting force to be suppressed. Objectivity, they point out, can only be attained through “the negating of subjectivity by the subject,” so that practices aimed at cultivating objectivity – such as the observation of details – can paradoxically intensify the self they might be intended to suppress (Galison and Daston 204). In this context, the

interaction of the desiring self with seemingly objective details that encode that self's desires can result in intense self-consciousness – as happens in Ruskin's theory of the "pathetic fallacy" in *Modern Painters III* (1856).

Ruskin famously defines pathetic fallacy as the poetic figure where the poet's mind is overpowered by the strong emotion he experiences at the sight of nature, which produces "a falseness in all our impressions of external things" (5.205) and cites Coleridge, whose speaker "fancies a life" in the leaf he perceives as "danc[ing]." In this context, pathetic fallacy can be read as an intensification of the Romantic process of perception, which, as Isobel Armstrong explains, is a process of subjective "self-creation," where the mind accesses and animates the object as a category of itself: "Objects are constituted by human thought and become categories of it because our consciousness is reflected back from the objects of perception which are knowable as consciousness" (*Language* 2). If Coleridge's speaker's "fancies a life" in the leaf he perceives, it is because the speaker's mind realizes its own consciousness in the leaf.

Ruskin's attitude towards Coleridge's perceptual "self-creation" is characteristically ambivalent: while he criticizes modern poets as "second-order poets" who are unable to govern their emotion, he professes his attraction to such poetry: "if we think over our favourite poetry, we shall find it full of this kind of fallacy, and that we like it all the more for being so" (5.204-5). His ambivalence to works of Romantic poetry enacts the dialectic of the simultaneous indulgence and constraint of self that subtends his attention to details of landscape painting. In his discussion of the details of the natural world in poetry, he reaches towards a different fantasy, one where the semblance of

extreme objectivity that is nevertheless generated by the self, and bears the impress of its subjective generation.

The simultaneous indulgence and constraint of self is made explicit in the fantasy of objectivity that is Ruskin's category of first-order poets, such as Dante, who, *while being susceptible to emotion*, nevertheless master it and instead represent objects as they really are. Critics have usually interpreted this distinction between self and the world as Ruskin's move away from Romantic subjectivity that imposes itself on the world, to objective realism. Uttara Natarajan argues that Ruskin's "preservation of distinction between object and self... is also a preservation of detail, a commitment to the mundane particularity of the part that precludes its submergence in the whole that is conceived by the encompassing self" ("Ruskin" 382). However, Natarajan's identification of detail with objectivity is complicated when we recall that objectivity – characterized by the observation of empirical detail – is intended to suppress subjectivity, while ironically strengthening it. In this context, the details observed by the first-order poet exemplify Ruskin's fantasy of objectivity, where the poet masters the distorting emotion he experiences in a show of objectivity (while the second order poet makes the fact of subjective creation explicit by letting his emotions master him). The ideal of the "first order" poet who generates an objective vision by mastering his emotion embodies Ruskin's own fantasy of mastering his desiring self. Nevertheless, Ruskin's fantasy of hard-won objectivity betrays the impress of his subjective desires, as we see in his close-reading of first-order poetry:

"Whose changing mound, and foam that passed away,

Might mock the eyes that questioned where I lay.”⁶

The above lines, which are apparently spoken by “a man in despair desiring that his body may be cast into the sea,” literalize Ruskin’s own desire to submerge his intense sense of self in a vision of objectivity. This sense of self nevertheless surfaces in his heightened, and highly self-indulgent figural reading of these lines that he paradoxically praises as “pure fact: “‘Mound’ of the sea wave is perfectly simple and true... one wave goes on, and on, and still on; now lower, now higher, now tossing its mane like a horse, now building itself together like a wall” (5.211). Ruskin’s use of figures to close-read what he considers a “pure fact” in poetry reveals how the appearance of objectivity that he creates to distance his intense sense of self, permits that self to be expressed obliquely.

The insight that Ruskin’s commitment to objectivity was generated and shaped by his intense sense of self compels a revaluation of his criticism of subject/object divide, current in philosophical English circles under the influence of Kantian philosophy (Teukolsky 47). Ruskin’s disavowal of this influence is doubly ironic, not only because of his own subjective preoccupations, but also because of the sources of Kantian thought (and of German idealism in general) in the English and Scottish empiricisms that were influenced Ruskin. As Peter Garratt writes, the mid-nineteenth century British writers and scientists were becoming increasingly aware that the self, the source of sensory experience, was constituted and rendered unstable by experience (an awareness that, as we have seen, is implicit in the work of Locke himself): “The contingent self was conceived simultaneously as the route toward knowledge and its obstacle (Garratt 16). In

⁶ The source of these lines is untraceable, both by Ruskin’s editors (5.211n) and by the present author.

this context, the divide between subject and object is unstable: “If our knowledge claims must be made ultimately referable to sense experience, then self, knowledge, and reality soon threaten to shade into one another... [H]ow can a real world be disentangled from subjectivity?” (Garratt 18). At first Ruskin dismisses the opposition between the “Subjective” (“the qualities of things which thus depend upon our perception of them”) and the “Objective” (pertaining to “the qualities of things which they always have, have, irrespective of any other nature,” 5.201-2) as a philosophical sophistry that places too much emphasis on the subjectivity of perception. From here it is a short road to believing that the only relevant truth of an object lies in one’s perception of it, which he equates with “egotism, selfishness, shallowness, and impertinence” (5.202). Instead, he insists that the qualities of an object, its capacity to produce a sensation, are always so, irrespective of whether it is perceived by anyone:

[A] gentian does not produce the sensation of blueness, if you don’t look at it. But it has always the power of doing so; its particles being everlastingly so arranged by its Maker. And, therefore, the gentian and the sky are always verily blue, whatever philosophy may say to the contrary; and if you do not see them blue when you look at them, it is not their fault, but yours (5.202).

It is easy to interpret this statement as an attempt to discount subjective experience in favor of objective truths. Yet Ruskin is not so much opposing the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, as he is opposing the supposed binary between them.⁷ By reconceiving the highly subjective sensation of color (as anyone who has discussed a color with

⁷ I am indebted to Maxwell Sater for pointing out that Ruskin rejects the binary implied between the two terms, rather than the concepts themselves.

anyone else would know) as an objective quality, he attempts to envisage a state of being that is not yet divided into the self and the world, a state where sensations are as objective as color appears to be, and are activated and experienced by transparent selves that free of the distortions of individual perceptions. It this is desired identity of subject and object that shapes his figure of the objective poet, who creates subjective poetic images that nevertheless represents objects as they really are,

Yet Ruskin's attempted immersion of subjectivity in an ideal of objectivity (though he does not use the word) is complicated by his chosen example of color. As we saw in our discussion of Locke's influence on *Modern Painters I*, color was deemed by Locke as a "secondary quality" of objects: it is not essential to an object, but is a "powe[r] of producing on other objects, or in us, certain effects and sensations" (3.158). Thus, in choosing color to illustrate his fantasy of objectivity in *Modern Painters III*, Ruskin reintroduces the element of subjectivity even as he appears to erase it. In *Modern Painters I*, we see how powerfully color registers on Ruskin's perceiving self. When distinguishing between primary and secondary qualities of objects *a la* Locke, his voice is clear and distinct when he is speaking of primary qualities, but during his discussion of the secondary quality of color – the quality that he would exclude from representation – his voice becomes personal, even passionate:

If we look at nature carefully, we shall find that her colours are in a state of perpetual confusion and indistinctness, while her forms, as told by light and shade, are invariably clear, distinct, and speaking. The stones and gravel of the bank catch green reflections from the boughs above; the bushes receive greys and yellows from the ground; every hair's breadth of polished surface gives a little bit

of the blue of the sky, or the gold of the sun, like a star upon the local colour; this local colour, changeful and uncertain in itself, is again disguised and modified by the hue of the light, or quenched in the grey of the shadow; and the confusion and blending of tint are altogether so great, that were we left to find out what objects were by their colours only, we could scarcely in places distinguish the boughs of a tree from the air beyond them, or the ground beneath them (1.161-2).

Ruskin's intent to excise details of color is compromised by his palpable fascination towards the details he would exclude. This fascination is due to the "changeful and uncertain" of natural colors, which do not restrict themselves to the object, but reflect themselves on nearby objects, blurring their specific identities, which is in turn exacerbated by the shifting light and shade. Tracing in meticulous, enthralled detail this shifting, animating play of differential nuances of color and light – an effort that is enhanced by its very impossibility – is essential to the highly personalized and passionate virtuosity of Ruskin's narrative style in this passage. Ruskin's virtuosic *praeteritio*, of ostentatiously naming in his word-painting what he would exclude in his landscape painting, momentarily frees him to indulge in his fascination by details, let slip past the constraints of classification to revel in the Dionysiac pleasures of self-dissolution.⁸ This pleasurable self-dispersal in details underlies his fantasy of the Apolline first-order poet. Even as the first-order poet submerges his sense of self in a vision of objective, his suppressed self emerges obliquely in Ruskin's intensely impersonal close-reading of his lines. This dialectic of intense self-dissolution and self-objectification in details shapes Ruskin's details of Gothic architecture.

⁸ I explore the dissolution of the details in the shifting details of color (among other intangible phenomena) in my fourth chapter on Aesthetic details in the works of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde.

Details: Masters of the Gothic

While Ruskin's engagement with Gothic architecture in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3) might appear as an extended shift of focus from his engagement with landscape art (to which he returns with *Modern Painters III*, published 1856), the two areas are connected by his developing interest in details as an objective form of subjective and emotional expression. The details of landscape painting and poetry discussed in *Modern Painters I* and *II* reappear transmuted into the stone details of Gothic architecture that Ruskin carves out in his architectural studies. The increased objectivity and materiality of Gothic details – which, unlike those of landscape painting and poetry, are carved in stone – paradoxically heightens their affective content, preserving in stone the disruptions of the self for posterity.

In *Seven Lamps*, Ruskin views the seemingly peripheral ornamental details of Gothic architecture as formal and affective center of the building, thereby upending not only the understanding of architecture, but also the aesthetic hierarchies that govern the import of art forms. In his 1855 Preface to *Seven Lamps*, Ruskin describes “the statuary, floral mouldings, mosaics, and other decorations” as “sculpture and painting,” which are in fact “the entire masters of the architecture”:

[T]he sculpture and painting... which I had long been in the careless habit of thinking subordinate to the architecture, were in fact the entire masters of the architecture ... [as] I examined the nobler examples of our Gothic cathedrals, it became apparent to me that the master workman must have been the person who carved the bas-reliefs in the porches; that to him all others must have been subordinate, and by him all the rest of the cathedral essentially arranged (8.10).

By refiguring the ornamental details of architecture as the “master” arts of sculpture and painting, Ruskin upends the divide between fine arts and decorative arts that was key to the neoclassical representational order. One iteration of this divide is Reynolds’s prohibition of details, which he equated with the mindless imitation of nature, as opposed to the abstracting, intellectual work of fine art, as we have seen. This prohibition particularly applies to ornamental details, which were identified with the mechanical labor of the working-class artisans. In 1762, the neoclassical theorist Lord Kames declared “profuse ornament in painting, gardening, or architecture” to show “a mean or corrupted taste,” for it “confound[ed] the eye, and to prevent[ed] the object from making an impression as one entire whole.” Conversely, “regularity, uniformity, proportion, order, and simplicity” conveyed the effect of a whole, and indicated artistic “genius” (17). Both Reynolds’s and Kames’s prohibitions on detail exemplify a classical aesthetic hierarchy based on the strict subordination of parts to the whole, of ornamental or natural details to ideals of symmetry and harmony. When Ruskin views ornamental Gothic details in terms of the fine arts of sculpture and painting, he does not merely reverse this subordination of part and whole, but conceptualizes a new kind of whole that is defined by its irregular and multitudinous constituent Gothic details, each of which functions as an autonomous whole, for it embodies the active thought and expression of its carver.

The resulting architectural whole, exemplified in the Gothic building, is an interplay of aesthetic autonomy and embedment, for each Gothic detail an aesthetic form in its own right while also being embedded amid other, similarly unique details. Far from being an overlaid accessory, Gothic details are integral to the purpose of Gothic building, which Ruskin envisions as dissolving the divide between the fine arts and the decorative

arts, for it combines the decorative aspect of art – the enhancement of man’s living spaces – with the ‘fine art’ role of providing man with mental pleasure: as Rancière writes, “Man needs the place where he lives after the workday to offer him not only shelter but also the feeling of life in action, joyous in itself. He thus needs rooms devoted to living together to be decorated with ornaments” (Aisthesis 139). Accordingly, Ruskin defines architecture not as the construction of buildings *per se* – which he terms “mere *building*” – but as “the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man, for whatsoever uses, that the sight of them may contribute to his mental health, power, and pleasure” (8.28). This combination of aesthetic pleasure and functionality that is the *raison d’être* of architecture is embodied above all in the details of Gothic ornament, which, in decorating man’s living spaces, provide him with the greatest mental pleasure and sustenance.

Ruskin’s placing of ornament at the center of his aesthetic contrasts with the views of other adherents of the Gothic Revival in Britain, notably the prominent Catholic English architect Augustus Welby Pugin. As Kenneth Clark explains, many aspects of Ruskin’s defense of the Gothic – the importance of Gothic ornament, the identification of the Gothic with nature, and the Gothic as the organic expression of the spiritual life of an ideal community from the past – were previously championed by Pugin (190-2). Yet Pugin views ornament as separate from, and subordinate to, the construction of the building: “Ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building” (*True Principles* ix). Pugin’s emphasis on construction as the essential function of architecture, on which ornament is overlaid for the secondary purpose of decoration, contrasts with Ruskin’s conceptualization of architecture itself in ornamental terms, where ornament, elevated to the fine arts of sculpture and painting, is the “master” of

architecture, and key to reconceiving the function of architecture in terms of greater aesthetic expression and affective experience.

In embodying the dissolution of the divide between the fine arts and the decorative arts, Ruskin's Gothic details exemplify the modern understanding of aesthetics itself as a singular realm of sensible experience. Jacques Rancière traces the emergence of this understanding of aesthetics to the disruption and reconfiguration of the classical hierarchical order of the fine arts to include "images, objects and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art," such as the details that characterize modern literature and genre painting (x-xii). While these fleeting or fragmented forms were previously excluded from the representational order because of their violation of classical symmetry and harmony, they were now "experienced as events and associated with the idea of artistic creation" (x). Rancière views the proliferation of details in modern prose narratives and genre paintings collectively, as resulting from the disruption of the classical order that subordinates parts to the whole. Yet this the violation of classical order can be perceived as an expression of the subjectivity of the artist. This connection between details and subjectivity is evident in Ruskin's engagement with the details of Gothic architecture, each of which, in its irregularity and uniqueness, expresses the creativity of different Gothic artisans. If these details can rouse intense affective experiences in the onlooker, it is because they themselves encode the free subjectivity and joy of their creators. Ruskin's conception of Gothic details thus embodies the subjective potential of details by positing an idea of subjectivity that expends its skill and passion in carving (recall *détailler* – to cut or to carve) seeming trifles that it imbues with affective significance.

Ruskin's emphasis on the affective and aesthetic significance of ornamental Gothic details can be viewed as part of a longstanding identification of Gothic details with subjective expression and inventiveness in Romantic aesthetics. While it is commonly acknowledged that Ruskin's engagement with the Gothic is in the tradition of the broader Gothic Revival championed by architect-theorists such as A.W.G. Pugin, the influence of Continental – and predominantly German – Romantic aesthetic engagements with the Gothic on Ruskin, and of the English Gothic Revival tradition in general, has largely been neglected.⁹ This neglect is in part due accepting at face value Ruskin's own criticism of German metaphysics – part of a wider British suspicion of aesthetic reflection as a “foreign” mode of thinking – which obscures the extent to which Victorian aesthetic discourses (even in opposition) were influenced by German idealist philosophy, by way of its British and Continental Romantic followers. In any case, the characteristic features of Ruskin's engagement with the Gothic – his equation of Gothic art with a lost, idealized Christian past, with the faithful study of nature, and more broadly with an aesthetic standard that opposes neoclassical ideas of symmetry and harmony – are already anticipated in a tradition of German aesthetic and philosophical writing, beginning with the works of Goethe and elaborated in the aesthetics of Hegel. These writers find in the irregular details of Gothic architecture the basis of a new branch of philosophy – aesthetics – that is based on subjective experience, rather than on objective principles, as the site and the standard of beauty. To examine the writings of these philosophers on Gothic details, who were filtered to Victorian culture through the work of followers such

⁹ An exception is Mark Swenarton's *Artisans and Architects: The Ruskinian Tradition in Architectural Thought* (Springer, 1988) which includes an invaluable survey of the identification of Gothic with an ideal of Christian art in the German Romantic writing (pp. 5-10).

as Pugin, Alexis Rio, and Thomas Carlyle, is not only to identify possible historical sources for Ruskin's thought, but also to gain conceptual tools for theorizing the place of details in Ruskin's Gothic aesthetics, and the centrality of detail in aesthetics more broadly.

In his essay "On German Architecture" (*Von deutscher Baukunst*, 1772), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe connects Gothic detail, aesthetics, and subjectivity, when he expands his appreciation of Strasbourg Cathedral into a new theory of art founded on the liberating experience of aesthetic irregularity. Prior to seeing the Cathedral, Goethe had, by his own admission, been an adherent of neoclassical standards – that is, of ancient Classical standards reinterpreted by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French writers and architects– that privileged "the harmony of mass, the purity of forms" embodied in regular columns and austere walls (106). By this view, the Gothic was everything the Classic was not: formless, disorganized, and afflicted with a profusion of ornamental details that distort and unsettle the overall shape of the building: "everything... that did not fit my system," all that was "barbaric," "undefined, disorganized, unnatural, patched-together, tacked-on, overloaded," from early German architecture to "gaudy dolls and paintings" (107). But when he first views Strasbourg Cathedral, the "confused caprices of Gothic ornament" appear in a very different light: "The impression that filled my soul was whole and large, and of a sort that (since it was composed of a thousand ornamental details) I could relish and enjoy, but by no means identify and explain" (107). While Goethe continues to characterize the Gothic in terms of an abundance of ornamental details, his actual encounter with these details leads him to reconceptualize their significance and function: instead of "smother[ing]" and distorting the mass of the

Cathedral, they comprise a new kind of harmony, embodied in an organic whole that comprises, and is animated by, its irregular ornamental details: he describes the Cathedral as a “harmonious mas[s], alive with countless details” (108).

Goethe attempts to reconceive the idea of artistic harmony in a way that not only makes allowance for, but indeed, gives pride of place to the profuse and irregular details of Gothic ornament. This new, animate, and contradictory kind of harmony cannot be reduced to any objective principles of artistic form, but is derived from nature itself, in whose “eternal works” “everything is perfectly formed down to the meanest thread, and all contributing purposefully to the whole” (108). In Goethe’s fantasy of Gothic organicism, diverse and irregular details comprise an animate harmony that is not fixed but forever growing, embodied not only in the overall form of the Cathedral, the vaults and spires of which soar upwards towards the heavens (unlike Classical architecture with its stolid rectangular forms and enclosing walls), but also in the constant “fretting” of the walls into ornamental details that themselves appear on the verge of flowering into ever more details, giving an appearance of constant generativeness and growth.

Like Ruskin eighty years later, Goethe employs his organic ideal of the Gothic as the basis of a transvaluation of aesthetic value: instead of the sterile, frozen, and shallow perfection of neoclassical French taste, the Gothic Cathedral in its imperfection embodies a “roughness that has meaning” (we see anticipated here Ruskin’s idea of the “well meant” “coarseness” of the Rouen figure. For Goethe, this meaningful “roughness” embodies a Christian and German architecture that is a home-grown alternative to the tyranny of neoclassical French taste. This supplanting of neoclassicism with a formally “imperfect” but deeply emotionally and socially resonant form involves the establishing

of a distinction within crucial implications for the emergent field of aesthetics: where Goethe identifies neoclassicism with the realm of “fine art,” the Gothic, with its organic harmony of irregular details, embodies an idea of “true and great art,” the realm of subjective expression and affective response: “true and great art, indeed often truer and greater than ‘fine art’ itself,” for its source is the “will to create form” that springs from man’s innermost spirit. Art is “the mind creating... beauty out of itself,” created when man finds “a material into which he can breathe his spirit” (109). Thus, Goethe produces out of the mess of Gothic details, a theoretical conception of art itself as a singular realm of subjective affect that is grounded in irregularity and novelty.

The precariousness of Goethe’s Romantic organic ideal is elaborated by G.W.F. Hegel’s conception of the Gothic in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, where the ornamental details he describes are on the verge of overwhelming the organic whole they comprise. The unstable balance between part and whole in Hegel’s Gothic is a particular take on the relationship between the universal and the particular that is at the core of Hegel’s understanding of art. While Hegel argues that the aim of art is to embody the “reconciliation” of this divide – as exemplified by the formal perfection of Classical art, namely, Greek sculpture – it is the overcoming or dissolution of this reconciliation that “fuels the forward motion of culture” (Siegel 565).¹⁰ The disruption of the perfect balance between the general and the particular that results from the failure or inability of the

¹⁰ Siegel describes the productive “failure” of sentimental literature, or “the self-reflective modern form of literature,” which the Romantic theorist Friedrich von Schiller views in opposition to the naïve, “the self-privileged site of unselfconscious original creativity” in his “On Naïve and Sentimental Literature” (Siegel 565). This division is further developed by Hegel’s sophisticated account of modern or “Romantic” art, the very lack of perfection of bespeaks a self-conscious modern spirit that springs from the self-reflective and analytical nature of modern culture. For a similar view of the productive failures of Hegel’s conception of modern art, see Benjamin Rutter’s analysis of “Romantic art” as “anti-art” (22-4).

subject to fully realize itself in objective matter results in the creation of formally imperfect but dynamic art forms – frequently characterized by excess details – that shape the self-conscious contours and development of artistic modernity.

Hegel identifies two forms of art that bespeak an absent or imperfect relationship between subject and object: “Symbolic” and “Romantic” art. Symbolic art (the earliest of Hegel’s divisions, preceding Classical art) is the result of spirit in a state of abstraction and un-self-consciousness, wherein it cannot embody itself in matter, but can only create dwellings or enclosures for gods and for communities. While Hegel classifies architecture as a Symbolic art, it is the other kind of imperfect art anticipated by the failures of Symbolic art – the modern or “Romantic” art of the Christian era – that is relevant to our analysis of Ruskin’s Gothic. Romantic art is the creation of an increasingly self-conscious and inward modern spirit that, having evolved beyond the power of a material medium to embody, generates richly particularized appearances of external nature even as it particularizes itself into inward thoughts and particular emotions. Thus, in “Romantic” art Hegel establishes a connection between external details and inward subjectivity.

Gothic art represents a curiously imperfect realization of this modern dynamism: Hegel views it as a Romantic phase of Symbolic or pre-Classical art, where an increasingly self-conscious Romantic spirit struggles to inscribe and realize itself on stone. Yet this struggle can be said to paradoxically energize the spirit’s creative activity, as it “split[s] up and elaborate[s]” aesthetic unity “down to the last particular detail” (2.695). In his account of Cologne Cathedral,¹¹ Hegel locates the activity of the “aspiring

¹¹ Despite his explicit naming of Goethe, Hegel’s choice of example – Cologne Cathedral – and his more particularized focus on its florid ornament is arguably drawn from Friedrich von Schlegel, who was himself

spirit” not only in the overall form of the Cathedral, but also in its decorative details, which he seeks to contain in an organic balance with the whole: “Just as religious devotion should... engrave indelibly on the heart the most universal and unchanging ideas, so also the simple architectural types must always bring back again to these main outlines the most varied divisions, carvings, and decorations and make them *disappear in face of those outlines*” (2.696; my emphasis). But what is surely remarkable about Hegel’s Gothic details is how *they do not disappear*, but instead threaten to break the outline and overcome the materiality of their own medium. In his enraptured account, Gothic ornamental details fret and roil the surface of the stone, making the stone appear precisely what it is not – lively, alive, and unsettled:

Now in architecture it is the visible, material, and spatial mass on which the inmost heart itself is so far as possible to be brought before contemplation. Given such a material, nothing is left to the artistic representation but to refuse validity to the material and the massive in its purely material character and to *interrupt it everywhere, break it up, and deprive it of its appearance of immediate coherence and independence*.... There is no architecture which along with such enormous and heavy masses of stone and their firmly mortised joints has still preserved, so completely [as Gothic architecture has done], the character of lightness and grace (2.696; editor’s insert; my emphasis).

influenced by Goethe’s essay. Inspired to elaborate praise by the elaborate ornament of the Cologne Cathedral, Schlegel likens it to “some incomparable production of the vegetable kingdom, while the numerous, wide-spreading, flying buttresses with their arches, decorations, crockets, finials, and pinnacles, resemble a forest” (174). Notably, Schlegel’s most enthusiastic dilations on the Cathedral’s organicism also focus on its decorations: “from the incomparable abundance of its decorations,” he writes, “[the Cathedral] seems to vie with the inexhaustible variety of nature herself” (174).

The fretting of the impassive stone surface into minute elaborations that frustrate fixity and coherence incarnates the struggle of spirit attempting to inscribe and realize itself in a resistant medium. The details' frozen state of perpetual unfixity is more formally dynamic and conceptually momentous than the perfections of Classical art: in fretting the stone, Gothic ornament embodies a new conception of what stone – and by extension, any material medium – can be made to do. Thus, the stone details of Gothic architecture approximate the virtuosic details of color and light in “true” Romantic art in that (to quote Rancière) “us[e] [the painting’s] surface as the means to repudiate [the material objects]: to mock their consistent solidity by making them appear through artificial means, but also illuminating their most evanescent aspect, closest to their shining and glittering surfaces, to the passing instant and changing light” (*Aisthesis* 31-2). This free play of color and light obviously cannot be achieved in stone: here spirit is not free but embedded and constrained. Yet Gothic details realize the process of creative play in embedded terms, as a ‘carving’ of the stone surface into patterns of perpetual and fecund indeterminacy. Generated in disharmony – in a mismatch between inward spirit and an external material world – Gothic details exacerbate the formal and epistemic indeterminacies of Romantic art not only by refusing proportion, coherence and finality, but also defying the stillness and inanimation of their own medium, threatening instead to bud and branch into eternally new permutations.

Hegel’s attention to the individual, unsettling details of the Gothic can be viewed as anticipating Ruskin’s work, strengthening the similarities that Ruskin’s contemporaries noted between their work – though there is no evidence that Ruskin read Hegel. Ruskin’s former secretary, W. G. Collingwood writes that while Ruskin was unable to read

German (and much German thought, including Hegel's, was not translated into English till the late nineteenth century), there are similarities between Ruskin's and Hegel's conceptions of art as expressions of the spirit: "[Ruskin's] extraordinary aptitude for picking up a hint, and making the most of it, inclines me to believe that what he knew of Hegel was gathered orally from some enthusiastic friend" (*Art Teaching of John Ruskin* 17); Robert Hewison writes with reference to Collingwood's claim: "Although, as in the case of Marx, this is a question of parallels and not of influences, the echoes of Hegel in Ruskin are strong" (*Argument*). in any case, when Ruskin writes that "the work of the Gothic heart is fretwork still, and it can neither rest in, nor from its labour, but must pass on, sleeplessly" (10.214), he is participating in a broader Romantic aesthetic tradition whose alignment of the Gothic with modern, aspiring subjectivity, is complicated by its mimetic verbalization of the irregular and indeterminate forms that are generated by the spirit's struggles. This tradition appears in the works of Romantic writers who are more widely recognized as Ruskin's influences (Svenarton 1-31, Collingwood 15) – Coleridge, Carlyle, the Catholic architect A.W.G Pugin, and the French Romantic writer (immensely popular in England) Alexis Rio. Carlyle's *Life of Schiller* (1825) and "The State of German Literature" (1827) emphasize the German idealist conception of art as arising from "the inmost Spirit of Man" (59); and the similarities between Ruskin's thought and Carlyle's so struck contemporaries that Ruskin wrote Carlyle both avowing his influence and explaining, "I have over and over again been somewhat vexed as well as surprised at finding that what I really *had*, and *knew* I had, worked out for myself, corresponded very closely to things that you had said much better... How much your general influence has told upon me, I know not, but I always confess it, or rather boast of

it, in conversation about you (Letter dated 23rd January 1855; 36.184). Alexis Rio, whom Ruskin studied before touring Italy in 1845 (Cooke and Wedderburn 4.xx), viewed in the “rude works” of early Christian art as the “imperfect but progressive expression - the voice, as it were, of the nations of modern Europe... [the] strongest and purest emotions of their hearts as well as the liveliest creations of their imaginations” (1-2), a sentiment that Ruskin would develop in his defense of the Gothic. Another crucial link between British and German aesthetic theory that is read and cited by Ruskin, albeit critically, is Coleridge (Collingwood 15), who in the *Miscellanies* draws on Schiller and Schlegel to view the Gothic cathedral in terms of “endless complexity and variety... united into one whole” (90). It is thus possible to trace an intellectual-historical line of descent between the German idealists to Ruskin, by way of their Romantic followers, and to place Ruskin as engaging with Continental aesthetic philosophy.

Where Ruskin differs from his Romantic forebears is his attention to individual details of Gothic ornament, which has the effect of relatively emancipating them from their containment in the Romantic ideal of unity. Where Coleridge, for instance, is “lost to actualities” of Gothic architecture (90), and even Hegel describes details in collective terms, as “[p]illars, pointed arches, and acute-angled triangles” (2.695), Ruskin traces individual details with empirical fidelity. But we have already seen how Ruskin’s empirical focus on detail is generated by his awareness of his own perceiving subjectivity. Ruskin distances his subjectivity by objectifying it in the figure of the Gothic artisan, who carves free irregular details that express his state of freedom, and his happiness at living in a society that permits him that freedom; in this respect, Ruskin reverses Hegel’s alignment of the Gothic with the spiritual unfreedom of “Symbolic” art,

where the spirit struggles to realize itself in stone. Yet the artisan's individual freedom is not absolute, but must be contained within social structures, much the same way details cannot be represented for their own sakes, but only with reference to a larger goal of artistic unity. The result, as we have seen in the opening of this chapter, are details that veer between parts and wholes, casting this divide in doubt. In the process, the pierced and roiled surfaces of Gothic ornament become miniature arenas for the transmutation of ideas – ornament into fine art, dead stone into organic form, fixed matter into fecund indeterminacy – realized in the shifting stone contours of individual details.

The Founding Stones of Venice

The unstable interplay of parts and wholes that enlivens Ruskin's conception of the Gothic was observed – in bewilderment – by one of his earliest and most devoted critics. Ruskin's father, John James Ruskin, wrote in 1846 to Ruskin's editor W.H. Harrison of his concern about the shift in his son's focus from artistic wholes to architectural fragments:

He is cultivating art at present, searching for real knowledge, but to you and me this is at present a sealed book. It will neither take the shape of picture nor poetry. It is gathered in scraps hardly wrought, for he is drawing perpetually, but no drawing such as in former days you or I might compliment in the usual way by saying it deserved a frame; but fragments of everything from a Cupola to a Cart-wheel, but in such bits that it is to the common eye a mass of Hieroglyphics—all true—truth itself, but Truth in mosaic" (cited in *Works* 8:xxiii).

In trying to comprehend his son's newfound interest in un-aesthetic un-wholes unfit to be framed, John James himself lapses into sentence fragments, attempting thrice to enter into

the contours of a thought process that eludes his understanding. He is perplexed not only by his son's indiscriminating attention (Ruskin *films* includes a "Cart-wheel" as well as a cupola in his new study of "art"; see Siegel *Desire* 206) but also by his artistic attention to fragments as wholes in their own right, which he reproduces as drawings fit to be framed. In this context, John James's use of "mosaic" to describe his son's work is perceptive, for it touches on the duality of Ruskin's engagement with fragments. A mosaic is an art form where a picture or pattern is comprised of fragments that, depending on the perspective of the viewer, retain their individual identity even as they comprise a larger pattern. John James's "mosaic" illuminates the simultaneous interplay between parts and wholes that his son identifies in fragments. However, Ruskin Sr.'s evaluation also anticipates his son's more ambiguous engagements with details, which are more uncertain entities than fragments: while the latter are parts broken off from wholes (from the Latin *frangere* – "to break"), details are wholes in their own right that also form part of larger wholes. John James Ruskin's phrase – "Truth in fragment" – anticipates his son's attempt to read 'truth in detail,' reach towards some broader truth accessible through careful attention to constituent details.

Indeed, in his letters to his disapproving father, Ruskin depicted himself as a reader of truth in details. In 1852, John James wrote another letter taking issue with Ruskin's empirical focus on details, and mentioning the architectural historian James Fergusson (known for *Picturesque Illustrations of Ancient Architecture in Hindustan*, where he provides laborious and accurate measurements and drawings of Indian buildings), who confirmed his suspicions that the buildings of Venice were "not very

interesting to English Architects.” Ruskin’s reply to his father is a riposte to Ferguson’s historical method as well as his broader dismissal of Venetian Gothic:

I am sorry you are not at all interested in my antiquarianism, but I believe you will like the book better when you see it finished ... [Venice] is simply a heap of ruins, trodden under foot by such men as Ezekiel describes, xxi. 31; and *this* is the great fact which I want to teach... You say Fergusson and others can give details. Yes, but they can’t put the details together (Letter dated February 15, 1852; 9:xxxvi-xxxvii).

“Put the details together”: Ruskin views the concrete details of Gothic architecture as clues potent with hidden meaning, from which the moral narrative of the glory and decline of Venice can be reconstructed. To Ruskin, this simultaneous, bifocal reading—this attention to details as significant forms that also yield broader meanings—differentiates him from contemporary writers who simply reproduce ornamental details while being blind to their true aesthetic and historical import, such as James Fergusson. Indeed, Ruskin employs his doubled attention to details to differentiate his work from previous architectural histories of Venice. It is with great pride that he declares *The Stones of Venice* to be “the only existing account of the details of early Venetian architecture on which dependence can be placed, as far as it goes” (9.4). Close attention to architectural details serves as the only acceptable evidence for ascertaining the key dates of the city’s history, a topic that Ruskin claims has been curiously neglected by previous antiquarians and architectural historians:

To my consternation, I found that the Venetian antiquaries were not agreed within a century as to the date of the building of the façade of the Ducal Palace, and that

nothing was known of any other civil edifice of the early city, except that at some time or other it had been painted. Every date in question was determinable only by internal evidence; and it became necessary for me to examine not only every one of the older palaces, stone by stone, but every fragment throughout the city which afforded any clue to the formation of its styles (9.3-4).

Ruskin contrasts his own meticulous attention to architectural details with the work of previous historians such as Leopold Cicognara's *Le Fabbriche e i Monumenti cospicui di Venezia* (1838–1850) and G.J. Fontana's *Venezia Monumentale Pittoresca* (1847-8), which he dismisses as lacking in detail and being inaccurate respectively. The relatively more detailed *Sulla Architettura e sulla Scultura in Venezia* (1847) by the Marchese Selvatico comes in for more respect, while still being “vague” in its relaying of architectural details – he calls it “clear in arrangement, and full of useful, though vague, information” (10.4). (Indeed, as we shall see below, Ruskin took Selvatico's work both as a guide and a polemic to be opposed and surpassed in its description of detail and its aesthetic judgments against Gothic architecture).

Yet Ruskin's meticulous attention to detail, and his pride at his meticulousness, is undermined by his awareness of the difficulty of perceiving and interpreting details of Venetian architecture. In what is surely one of his most poignant admissions, Ruskin confesses the “cost of truth” in giving architectural details, which not only consists of the “Expenditure of time” in observing details in difficult circumstances, but also of the sheer impossibility of recreating a fully objective account of these details in writing:

[I]t is not easy to be accurate in an account of anything, however simple.

Zoologists often disagree in their descriptions of the curve of a shell, or the

plumage of a bird, though they may lay their specimen on the table, and examine it at their leisure; how much greater becomes the likelihood of error in the description of things which must be in many parts observed from a distance... I am ashamed of the number of times in which I have had to say, in the following pages, "I am not sure... Only, as far as my time, and strength, and mind served me, I have endeavoured, down to the smallest matters, to ascertain and speak the truth (10.5).

In this bravura literary passage, Ruskin uses uncertainty as a spur to greater efforts at objectivity, even as he acknowledges that complete objectivity might be elusive.¹² Remarkably, Ruskin recognizes that the uncertainty of perceiving and describing details is not something that can be eliminated by taking special care and effort, for it is ingrained in the acts of perception and of description themselves. However careful observation and measurement may be, there will always be *something* too subtle and fine to detect – "some imperceptible inadvertency," as Ruskin puts it with superb delicacy – that makes the observation incomplete, and causes different observations of the same item by different observers. Yet the awareness of incomplete truth, far from discouraging Ruskin, however, is used by him to spur himself to ever greater efforts at painstaking precision, with the understanding that complete objectivity remains an ideal rather than a fact. In this context, Ruskin's will to objectivity is itself generated by his awareness of

¹² It is possible to detect the influence of Ruskin's self-aware attempt at accuracy in another famous, albeit fictional, avowal of realism – that of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859). Eliot had famously reviewed *Modern Painters III* in 1856 and had praised Ruskin's "realism"; her narrator similarly vows to "give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective... but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath (155). I explore Eliot's self-aware realism further in my third chapter on *Middlemarch*.

the inevitability of subjective perception, and is constantly informed by an awareness of its own impossibility.

It is in light of this generative indeterminacy that we must view Ruskin's extraordinarily detailed notes of the details of Venetian Gothic architecture. To do so does not undermine Ruskin's sincere belief and attempts at objectivity, but paves the way for a greater appreciation of the imperatives that at once shaped and frustrated his desire for objectivity. Rather than a passionless list of given details, his notes reveal an aesthetically generative interplay of parts and wholes that shapes the form and content of his argument regarding the Gothic. This shifting interplay of parts and wholes is evident not only in his treatment of individual parts but also in the way his variegated notes function as parts in an elaborate and shifting system of note-taking.

Ruskin's perceptions of the details of Gothic architecture during his visit to Venice in the winter of 1849-50 are preserved for posterity in a system as shifting and layered as his conception of the Gothic itself. Eight gemlike notebooks, bound in marbled covers and with pages often watermarked with a floral border – together with the larger M Diary notebook and several worksheets – attest to Ruskin's growing attention to architectural details.¹³ While Ruskin begins with focusing on whole houses, as seen in his title of the first notebook he begins in Venice – *Housebook 1* (begun in late October or early November 1849) – he soon becomes interested in the details of their doors, to

¹³ The majority of Ruskin's notes (the M Diary, over 250 numbered and unnumbered worksheets, and seven of the eight pocket notebooks (Notebook N (begun in Amiens en route to Venice), *Housebooks 1* and *2*, *Palace Book*, *St. M Book*, *Bit Book*, *Doorbook*, and *Gothic Book*) are preserved in the Ruskin Library at Lancaster University, UK. The Verona Book pocket notebook is permanently exhibited at The Ruskin Museum, Conistone, Cumbria, UK. The M2 Diary notebook (a continuation of the M Diary) is at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Several worksheets and fragments of worksheets are at the Pierpoint Morgan Library in New York. For a full overview of the material, see Robert Hewison's invaluable and comprehensive guide for the electronic edition of Ruskin's notebooks, hosted by Lancaster University (<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/ruskinlib/eSoV/notes/toplevel.html>).

record which he opens another notebook, *Doorbook* (begun in mid-December 1849) as an extension of *Housebook I*.¹⁴ Soon his interest in specific architectural elements develops further into an interest in miscellaneous bits - capitals, archivolts, arches and windows - that catch his eye, leading to the delightfully named “*Bit Book* (begun in January 1850). Around the same time, he begins the Gothic Book in early January 1850, tellingly comprising a plethora of different details, from mouldings to the cusps of arches to pillar capitals. Taken together, these pocket notebooks trace a trajectory of increasing particularity, which paradoxically heightens Ruskin’s need to extract a sense of the Gothic as an abstract ideal that comprises varying and irregular bits. Ruskin builds on this process in the large vellum-bound M and M2 Diary Notebooks – the first of which was begun before the pocket notebooks, but which becomes what Robert Hewison terms “the master notebook to the series” (55) – in which Ruskin synthesizes his notes from the pocket notebooks and the worksheets into syncretic narratives that are responsive to the multiform beauty of the details he identifies. These notebooks and worksheets themselves function as the details of an evolving scheme of Gothicism that culminates in *The Stones of Venice*. To read his Notebooks and Diaries alongside the text of *The Stones of Venice* is to witness the gradual construction of a massive and elaborate Gothic edifice that comprises, and is governed by, its constituent stylistic details.

Ruskin’s fascination with ornamental details that he recognizes as hovering between parts and wholes comes to the fore in his notebooks. Early on during his stay in Venice (in late November or early December 1849), Ruskin records in worksheet No. 61

¹⁴ For the dating and overview of Ruskin’s system of note-taking, including the pocket notebooks, I have drawn on Robert Hewison’s invaluable *Ruskin and Venice* (Thames and Hudson, 1978, pp. 54-60) and the extensive notes on the electronic versions of the notebooks.

and in the M Book Diary, aberrant details in the wall carvings of the Palazzo Lion-Morosini in the Corte del Remer, facing the Grand Canal. This house is in the Byzantine style, one of the progenitor-styles of the Gothic, and its ornament is in keeping with the rigid formalism that Ruskin expects from the Byzantine. But two little details catch his eye –

The carvings of the great arch are the richest I have yet seen on any arch of the kind, covering both architrave & soffit Fig 1 No 61 [worksheet 61 is reproduced below] is a careful section... Perhaps the most curious thing connected with the arch is that while in both ornaments the animals seem throughout to be kept within the intaglio limit, yet, *in the soffit wreath, two little beasts, one on each side, who fill an angle of the leafage, have one a paw, the other a claw, extended over the flattened roll at the angle*: drawn upon it rudely by a light incision; an interruption which is so small the paws being not the 150th part of the [diagram]: that the eye does not perceive it - it seems purposeless; and yet is delightful (M Book 81; see Worksheet 61 (below); my emphasis).

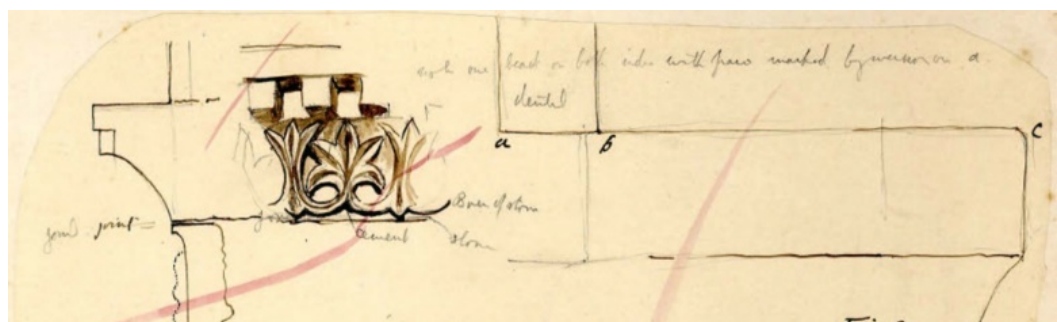


Fig. 2. Worksheet 61. Campiello del Remer, c. 1849-50 (by John Ruskin). At the top, Ruskin describes the beasts: “not one beast or both sides with paw marked by mason.” *The Ruskin Library and Research Center, Lancaster University.*

Slightly more successful in escaping their confinement than the gnome, the two beasts are the exceptions that bring to life the larger ornamental scheme of the archivolt – “a wreath of flower-work — a constant Byzantine design — with an animal in each coil... [that is] kept strictly within its coil... [n]ot the shake of an ear, not the tip of a tail, overpasses this appointed line” (9.305). The overstepping of the two beasts which had struck Ruskin so strongly in his notes, is now described in terms that suggest an attempt to smooth over their transgression: “*by mutual consent*, two little beasts (*not looking, for the rest, more rampant than the others*), one on each side, lay their small paws across the enclosing fillet at exactly the same point of its course, and thus break the continuity of its line” (9.305; my emphasis). Through his delicate qualifying phrases, Ruskin seeks to put a construction of harmonious discord on the beasts, and by extension, of the Gothic aesthetic they exemplify to him: they embody neither transgression nor imprisonment but “an acknowledgment by the ornament of the fitness of the limitation; —of its own perfect willingness to submit to it” (10.305). Such a paradoxical construction, which recalls his analysis of the gnome at Rouen, enables Ruskin to have it both ways: to delight in the aberrant form of the details, which establishes their independence from the surrounding field of identical patterns, while still viewing them as a variation of the larger ornamental scheme, which remains to him essentially unthreatened. Yet their deliberate aberration points to an incipient scheme of ornament, and of aesthetics in general, that ambiguity and aberrance takes for its basis: in the text of *Stones*, Ruskin identifies these tiny deviant details as marking the beginning of the transition from Byzantine to “Gothic fire and energy” (10.293).

The little beasts' captivating deviance is key to their appeal to Ruskin, and bears similarities to another mode of detail – the *punctum* of a photograph, defined by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* as “the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (26). What differentiates the *punctum* from these details is the unintentionality of the former: while the photographer does not deliberately make the *punctum* – as Michael Fried writes, “the *punctum*... appear[s] to have turned up in the photograph without the photographer having been aware of its presence” (283) – the Gothic details are very much the deliberate creations of the carver, exerting his individual desires and freedom to the best of his ability, striving to be noticed amid the totality of details by other carvers amid which he is embedded. It is this interplay of autonomy and embedment that renders the detail the significant for Ruskin, triggering in him an “affective response” that Diarmuid Costello emphasizes is central to the experience of the *punctum* (157). John Unrau notes Ruskin’s “excited discovery that many of his favorite facades display a subtle variation from apparent regularity of sub-division which makes a mockery of all attempts to reduce their design to formulae” (54). In *Stones* Ruskin, however, employs these semi-autonomous details as the basis of a new conception of relative autonomy, even as he smooths over their deviance, by identifying them as the beginning of “Gothic fire and energy” (10.293).

Ruskin’s notes reveal how he repeatedly traces the emergence of the Gothic in details (chiefly ornamental) that deviate formally from the larger design, and that he views as the embodiments of an incipient Gothic “liveliness” and animation. For instance, Ruskin identifies the entrance of the church of San Fermo Maggiore at Verona

as being in the Lombardic style, a variation of the Byzantine style¹⁵ - but the arcade in the north side showing the early Gothic style. The Gothic emerges above all in the ornamented frieze of the arcade:

Like in the Lombard the flat leaf frieze issuing from a lambs mouth of S. Fermo,
is so much more flowing natural & living than anything Byzantine
perfectly true to curve of natural leaves (*Bit Book* 64L/19w)

While the frieze, with the leaf frieze emerging from the mouth of the lamb, is in keeping with the general pattern of the Byzantine/Lombardic style, its naturalism (“so much more flowing natural / & living” style) strikes Ruskin as signifying the emergence of the Gothic spirit, where the “liveliness” of the artist paradoxically finds free expression in the meticulous representation of nature. The results can sometimes be “ill-cut,” as we see below, yet Ruskin prizes the animation and fancy he sees in them:

This lamb as like a real lamb as they can make it.

two beasts [?] on plinth below so ill cut that I cannot say if wolf or dog or fox but
full of spirit (*Bit Book* 64L/19w)

¹⁵ Ruskin considers Lombardic architecture a form of Byzantine architecture, and a precursor of the Gothic. He characterizes it as “rough but majestic work, round arched, with grouped shafts... and endless imagery of active life and fantastic superstitions” (9.40).

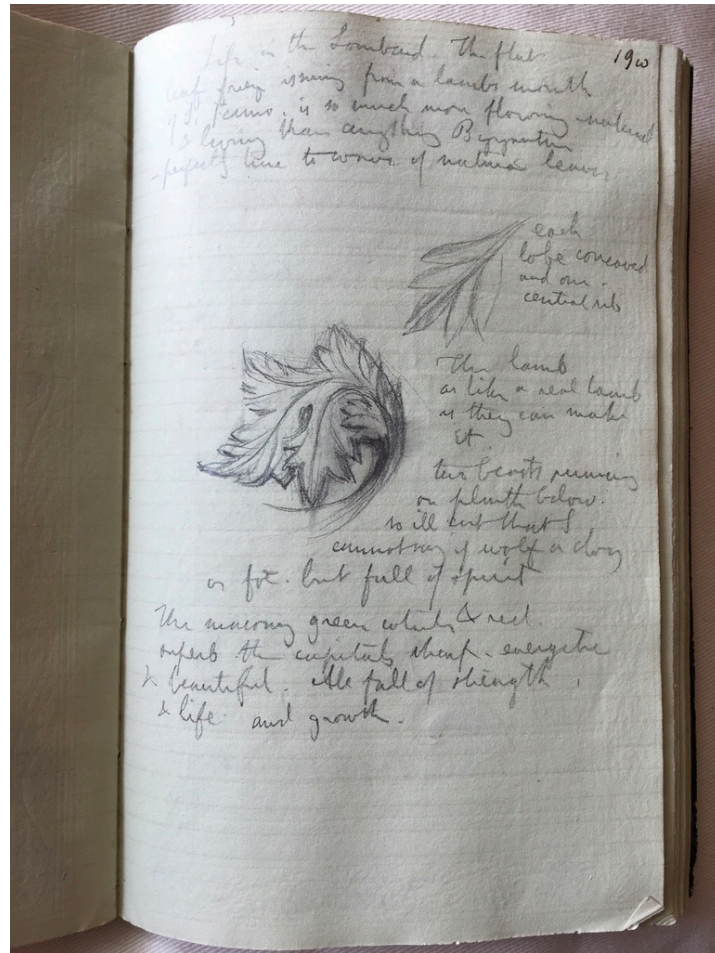


Fig. 1.3. *Bit Book*, p. 64L/19w. *The Ruskin Library and Research Center, Lancaster University*.

Far from detracting from the overall form of the beasts, the “ill cut[ting]” actually enhances them for Ruskin, who views their ambiguity as a sign of Gothic inventiveness. In his chapter “The Nature of Gothic,” as we shall see, he recasts similar “ill cutting” as a sign of the liberty of the medieval Gothic artisan, who is free to articulate his vision on the stone even if his skills may be less than consummate, and the result lacking in Classical regularity and perfection. Ruskin’s appreciation of what appears to be Gothic

imperfection is at the core of his idea of the Gothic as the only rational architecture, fashioned by artisans who were also thinking artists in their own right.

“Gothic fire and energy” attain their zenith in the Ducal Palace, the “central building of the world” (10.38). Paradoxically, this central building is characterized by its lack of centrality: Ruskin claims it “[does] away with the subtle proportion and centralisation of the Byzantine” style (10.278). While Byzantine architecture was “centralised in its ornamentation as much as in its proportions” – for instance, the Byzantine builders of the Fondaco de’ Turchi made its “midmost capital of the upper arcade... larger and more studied than all the rest” (10.277) – the pillars of the Ducal Palace arcades are “all different and ungrouped”: some are larger, depending on with architectural necessity, and each has its unique ornamentation on the capitals, in keeping with specific themes (we will explore Ruskin’s detailing of the pillars shortly).¹⁶ The lack of centralization is also evident in the palace’s corner angles, the rich ornamentation of which reveals the importance the Gothic bestows on seemingly marginal elements. Ruskin claims that while the corners of buildings received little aesthetic attention in Classical forms of architecture, the Gothic aesthetic – of which Ducal Palace is the chief representative – “throws the main decoration upon its angles” (10.357), partly to highlight their architectural importance in the Gothic, which requires strong corners to reinforce the flanks of the buildings, and partly in keeping with its attention to seemingly marginal things. Thus, the corner angles of the building, which are left bare and sharp in other architectural forms, become the site of a rich accumulation of ornament in which

¹⁶ Ruskin concedes one lingering influence of Byzantine centralization in the Ducal Palace: in the pillars of the upper arcade, “*the central one is of pure Parian marble, while all the others are of Istrian stone*” (10.278). I will shortly touch on the upper arcade pillars, and the challenges they pose to Ruskin’s narrativization of the Gothic.

Ruskin finds the chief lessons of Gothic vitality. The ‘Vine Angle’ of the corner nearest the Ponte della Paglia, showing Noah in a state of drunkenness with his sons, under the spreading branches of a vine, comes in for particular praise. In his notes, Ruskin is inspired by the animation he sees in the carving of the vine leaves:

[E]very leaf is bent & waved like reality: and the surface so smooth that it cannot be believed it was ever chiselled: - smooth almost to lustre: *except one leaf* thrown to the front or outer angle on purpose: which is curved with its entire [sic] reticulation: cross bars and all: in raised ribs, from its undulating surface: I never saw anything so far carried in imitative sculpture (PB.35).

The breathtaking naturalism of the leaves is derived not only from their minute detailing, but also from the slight disarrangement of the outlying leaf: the outlier that determines his sense of an animate whole. This tension shapes his contradictory formulation of Naturalism in his chapter “The Nature of Gothic,” where he cites this foliage as an example: “It is faithful as a representation of vine, and yet so designed that every leaf serves an architectural purpose, and could not be spared from its place without harm. This is central work; fact and design” (10.218). Notably, the errant leaf has disappeared, been sublimated into an organic fantasy where the Gothic inventor’s freely creative design is realized as the meticulous recreation of nature. In the process, Ruskin subsumes the aberrant detail of the leaf into a larger, contradictory aesthetic whole that is at once based on, and seeks to contain, the individual freedom and creativity of the Gothic worker.

While the errant leaf of the Vine angle enables Ruskin to create his organic fantasy, the “Fig-tree Angle” – the corner pillar capital showing the Judgment of Solomon – permits no such creative analysis, for its leaves are perfectly regular. In his

notes and in *Stones*, Ruskin criticizes the leaves as exemplifying the Renaissance aesthetic, with its revival of lifeless Classical regularity, encroaching on the Gothic:

[T]he fig leaves... look glued on to the stem, and curl up at the ends as if they were dogeared; or were coming off. They have no unity of spring. No sweep nor strength nor concave hold; though much waved and undulated perfectly flaccid & clumsy in their stems (M2 Diary 107; original emphasis).

The great sin of the fig leaves is their well-cut regularity and finish, in place of the irregularity that signifies organic form. This is the core of his great complaint against Renaissance ornament: the uniformity of form, the evidence of indiscriminating industriousness, that suggests a mindless pursuit of perfection, in place of the innovative irregularity that evinces the thoughtful study of nature. Yet even in this pillar, which he makes into the epitome of Renaissance vices, Ruskin cannot help noticing “a little bit of naturalism”: “a lizard real size” that catches his eye, and that complicates his classification of the pillar. As a “naturalistic” detail in a Renaissance pillar, it suggests that Renaissance ornament too has its organic forms, even if they are remnants of the Gothic: that the boundary between the Gothic and the Renaissance styles is not clear-cut, but proceeds along a continuum of degree rather than kind.

Perhaps because of the challenges the little lizard posed to Ruskin’s classification of the pillar, and his general denigration of Renaissance ornament, it is not mentioned in the text of *Stones*. Instead, we have an outright condemnation of the Solomon pillar as exemplifying Renaissance coldness and regularity. Ruskin’s attempts at finding a clear division of Gothic and Renaissance architecture has a polemical purpose: by placing the irregular and indeterminate Gothic details at the center of

aesthetic value, he not only overturns artistic standards based on idealized symmetries that were the legacy of neoclassical theorists such as Reynolds, but also modifies the place of Venice in existing historiographical and art-historical traditions that were also shaped by those classical aesthetic hierarchies. Motivating his attention to and appreciation of details of Gothic ornament is the legacy of artistic and architectural histories of medieval art and of Venice in particular which, as seen in the beginning of this section, he takes to task for their lack of engagement with architectural detail. While Ruskin's criticism may be tinged with disingenuousness, it has some justice: even the most 'detailed' treatment of all – that by Ruskin's chief interlocutor, Selvatico – evinces an established prejudice against the irregular details of the Gothic in particular, which reveals his adherence to Classical standards. For instance, he gives a notably poor evaluation of the Gothic tomb (dated 1423) of the doge Tommaso Mocenigo in the Basilica di Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, calling it a "rich but ugly (*ricco ma non bel*)" example of "the Italian school... one of the last links which connect the declining art of the Middle Ages with that of the Renaissance, which was in its rise" (147; cited Ruskin 9.49). His disapproval of the tomb's 'rich ugliness' shapes his own writing, as he fastidiously declares: "We will not stay to particularise the defects" of the tomb's figures (147). In his own description of Mocenigo's tomb in his notes, however, Ruskin pointedly "stays to particularise" the tomb's offensive details in the details of his own writing:

The head emaciated - large featured - grandly and boldly in their fine natural...
the skin gathered in deep folds under the chin - the veins on the temples branched

and starting... All noble and quiet - the white sepulchred dust marking like light the stern angles of the cheek and brow" (M2.21L).

For Ruskin, the unsightly details of "deep folds" and "veins" attest to the sculptor's great care for his art, as well as his sympathetic understanding of his subject. The sculptor's deeply sympathetic understanding of the great doge's dignity inspires him to create details that, in their meticulously but tenderly rendered ugliness, convey that dignity to the viewer. In *Stones*, Ruskin explicitly adds his own emotional reaction to the emotional effect of the effigy by adding his own emotional reaction: "The face is emaciated, the features large, but so pure and lordly in their natural chiselling, that they must have looked like marble even in their animation. They are deeply worn away by thought and death" (9.48). It is not the representation of details for their own sake that gives the Gothic its significance, but details represented with a view to conveying a larger aesthetic and affective purpose.

If the details of Ruskin's writing can express tenderness and care, they can also be unsparing and ruthless, as seen in his detailing of the Renaissance tomb of the doge Andrea Vendramin in the same cathedral. Selvatico, reversing the terms of his sparse description of Mocenigo's effigy, claiming the Vendramin tomb exceeds his powers of description – "Long it would take to describe the medals, and cameos, and friezes that with artistic skill decorate the fillings of the whole monument" – before going on to do that precisely, with his elaborate praise (running on for three pages) of the "correct elegance of profiles and proportions," the "exquisiteness of ornaments, and above all its perfect symmetry" (220). For Ruskin, however, this strict adherence to the artificial symmetry of Renaissance classicism sacrifices the emotional truth and feeling apparent in

the relatively cruder but sincere Gothic monument. The details of the Vendramin effigy evince no care of the artist for his subject, but an opportunistic, gaudy showiness that Ruskin dubs “Chiselmanship” (M2.40). While one hand of the Vendramin effigy is awkwardly “thrown off the middle of the body - in order to show to the spectator its fine cutting,” the other side, turned away from the spectator, has no hand at all: “At first I thought it had been broken off, but on sweeping the dust off, I saw the wretched figure effigy had only one hand and was a ~~block-cut-a-block~~ mere block on the other side” (M2.41). Even more “grotesque” is the face, “heavy and disagreeable,” with “[o]ne side wrinkled elaborately, the other {left} smooth... one cheek only is smoothed, and the other only blocked out, and distorted ~~too~~ besides,” where the sculptor expects the spectator cannot see it (M2.42). In *Stones I*, Ruskin builds on these detailed notes to create a moralistic narrative of the decline of the Gothic, which emphasized truth of feeling over the appearance of external order, into the empty symmetries of the Renaissance, with its “utter coldness of feeling, as could only consist with an extreme of intellectual and moral degradation: Who, with a heart in his breast, could have stayed his hand as he drew the dim lines of the old man’s Countenance... as he reached the bend of the grey forehead, and measured out the last veins of it at so much the zecchin?” (9.52).

In the details of his own writing, Ruskin pointedly goes where the corrupt Renaissance sculptor had “stayed his hand,” and stays where the modern architectural historian, enamored of the artificial and unfeeling regularity of Renaissance classicism, did not “stay to particularise.” We see the extent of Ruskin’s dilations in his account of the Ninth Capital in the Lower Arcade of the Ducal Palace (the most extensive of such

accounts), which depicts the Christian Virtues.¹⁷ Selvatico's description of the same capital is matter-of-fact, merely listing the Virtues as they are depicted, without describing the figures that represent them: "In the ninth one sees the virtues most necessary to man, Faith, Fortitude, Temperance, Humanity, Charity, Justice, Prudence and Hope, and above each is a short inscription which declares the meaning and the importance" (129).¹⁸ In contrast, Ruskin meticulously traces the individual figures on *each side* of the capital, before seeking to connect them into a system of virtues and vices. In the *Palace Book*, for instance, he painstakingly describes a figure on the 8th side of the pillar as "Very devotional in expression praying to this [drawing fig. 1] with hands up... [Ruskin's transcription] Sperans in Deo" (PB.30L; see below). Rather than expound the conceptual meaning of the figure, Ruskin focuses on its form, expressing admiration at what he reads as its "expression" of "devotion," even as he is unable to identify the object of the that devotion (hence the accompanying drawing). In the M Diary notebook, he repeats his observation of the figure being "very devotional and reverent in expression," while identifying the object with possible bemusement as "a hand coming out of the sun" (M.165).

¹⁷ In Ruskin's final system of number, adopted from Selvatico's, this is the ninth pillar counted from the Noah/Vine Angle towards the Piazzetta/Molo angle (which features the corner angle showing the Fall of Man).

¹⁸ "IX. Nel nono veggonsi le virtù più necessarie all' uomo, Fede, Fortezza, Temperanza, Umanità, Carità, Giustizia, Prudenza le Speranza, e sopra ognuna è una breve iscrizione che ne dichiara il senso e, l'importanza" (129).

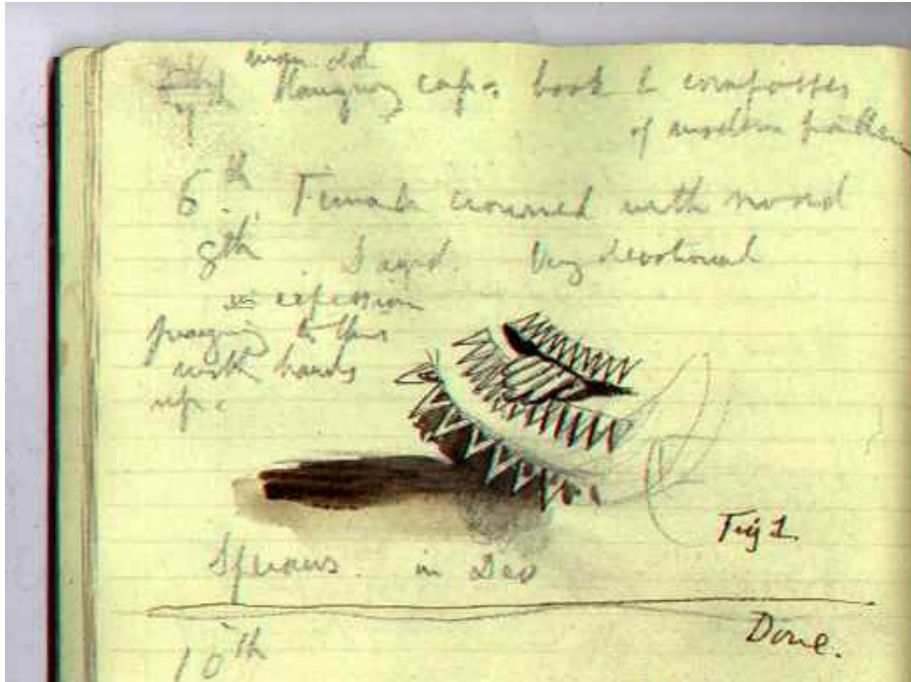


Fig. 1.4. Detail, *Palace Book 30L*. *The Ruskin Library and Research Center, Lancaster University*.

In *Stones*, Ruskin uses his formal description as the basis of an extended reflection on the Virtue of Hope, comparing it to its representations in systems of Christian virtue in art and literature – by the medieval Italian painter Giotto (who represents Hope as “winged, rising in the air, while an angel holds a crown before her,”) as well as by the Renaissance English poet Spenser in the Masque of Cupid in the *Faerie Queen*:

“She always smyld, and in her hand did hold

An holy-water-sprinckle, dipt in deowe” (book iii. canto xii. 13, qtd. Ruskin

10.399).¹⁹

Ruskin’s references to Giotto and Spenser have the effect of placing the details of the Ducal Palace pillars within broader systems of the Christian Virtues. In using references

¹⁹ As Ruskin notes, this is a representation of “fallacious Hope” rather than the Virtue of Hope in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (book iii. canto xii. 13).

to Spenser, Ruskin not only renders the decorations of the Ducal Palace palatable to a Protestant English audience, but also transforms a single side of a capital of a single pillar in the Ducal Palace into an immersive aesthetic experience that is on par with Spenser's verse that it illuminates and by which it is illuminated. Ruskin's own explanation for citing Spenser is that "it is nearly as necessary to point out the profound divinity and philosophy of our great English poet, as the beauty of the Ducal Palace" (10.396).

Ruskin's painstaking elaboration of the ornamentation of each capital, while also seeking to make them fit into a larger theological systems and art-historical narratives, is in keeping with his contradictory imperative to both view details as uniquely expressive, liberating wholes, while also containing them within larger wholes. In the process, the wholes he makes are themselves shaped by the irregularity and animating energy of their constituent details. Ruskin's choice of Spenser to describe the pillars can be seen as one such attempt to create an irregular, animate whole to contain these details. His choice of Spenser may be motivated not only for the theological discussion of Virtues in the *Faerie Queene*, but also by the "rough beauty and multiformity" of Spenser's verse, as Naomi Levine terms it. Levine writes how in nineteenth-century poetic historiography, Spenserian (and Shakespearean) verse represented as alternative to the rigid neoclassicism of French verse. Spenser's free verse, with its musically irregular prosody and its imperfect rhymes, were recognized by Romantic era historians such as Schlegel as not an aberration from the Classical ideal, but the foundation of a new, more vital kind of poetry ("Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Historiographical Poetics" 89). I would argue that by aligning Spenser with the Ducal Palace ornamentation, Ruskin is propounding a new understanding of aesthetics that inheres in the irregular beauty that Gothic ornamental

details – and details in general – embodied in the culture of the. Performing this argument, as it were, are the motions of Ruskin’s own writing – the simultaneous distention and abstraction, the indulgent elaboration of details followed by (often failed) attempts at restraint, which energizes his elaborate descriptions, making them more dilatory, more digressive and richly realized than those of previous historians, even as they are themselves the result of his careful and deliberate process of selection and omission.

Ruskin’s elaborate praise for the Ninth pillar is markedly missing from his descriptions of the later capitals of the Lower Arcade, which he identifies as dating from the Renaissance, and in which he detects the Renaissance sins of unfeeling regularity and unoriginality. Not only are the themes of the ornamental details of the Renaissance pillar capitals “copied” from those of the Gothic capitals, but the Renaissance variations display none of the warmth of feeling or the independent thought that distinguished the Gothic ‘originals.’ Thus, Ruskin criticizes the representation of Hope in the Renaissance pillar for leaving out the detail of the hand extending from the sun to which the figure of Hope in the original had prayed with such “devotional” feeling. Ruskin views this exclusion to be a betrayal of the virtue of Hope itself, the “most distinctively Christian” of all virtues – the “*testing* virtue” that distinguishes true Christians, who alone have a “habitual hope of, or longing for, heaven” (10.399); if one views the mysterious hand/sun detail as a representation of the divine to which Hope prays for salvation, created by the hand of the fervently believing Gothic builder, then its exclusion in the Renaissance pillar reveals the Renaissance’s builder’s lack of faith, and by extension, his lack of personal touch. Instead of personal Christian faith, “Pagan” sentiment, heedless of feeling and

piety, has taken over, which finds its architectural analog in cold, unfeeling features and details. The rest of Ruskin's description of the twenty-ninth pillar capital is damning in its uncharacteristic brevity: in *Stones*, he merely writes: "TWENTY-NINTH CAPITAL. Copied from the ninth" (10.425).²⁰ Noting such details enables him to craft a narrative of Gothic decline into the unfeeling and irreligious Renaissance, which includes or excludes details in keeping with its artificial notions of symmetry rather than true religious import. The contrast between the "meaning" details of the Gothic and the coldly unfeeling ones of the Renaissance, which he hammers home frequently in his descriptions of pillar carvings and great tombs alike, forms the basis of his narrative of the decline and fall from Gothic organicism to the dead classicism of the Renaissance.

Yet the very details whose vital defiance of symmetry attracted Ruskin's observation and inspired his narratives of Gothic growth and decline, also prove resistant to those narratives. Already his notes of the Lower Arcade pillars evince his problematic fascination with details he finds grotesque and repulsive, and which yet inspire some of the most meticulously detailed drawings. In the Palace Book, for instance, he draws and describes a "Monstrous - but powerfully cut creole head" and a "horrible brute eating a [drawing of gourd]," with "hoof ends below in a Talon with lions paws [sic]" on the eighth pillar capital (PB.29L); in his matter-of-fact description of the same in *Stones*, he excises the emotion we see in his notes: "a monstrous head, founded on a Negro [sic]

²⁰ Similarly, Ruskin unfavorably contrasts the carved heads of children in the fourth pillar capital (which he dates to the fourteenth century) to those of the Renaissance copy (the thirty-fifth pillar): while the heads in the former are "full of youthful life, playful, humane, affectionate... but with much manliness and firmness," the carved children of the Renaissance are "dull smooth-faced dunces, without a single meaning line in the fatness of their stolid cheeks" (10.388).

type, hollow-cheeked, large-lipped, and wearing a cap made of a serpent's skin"
(10.393).

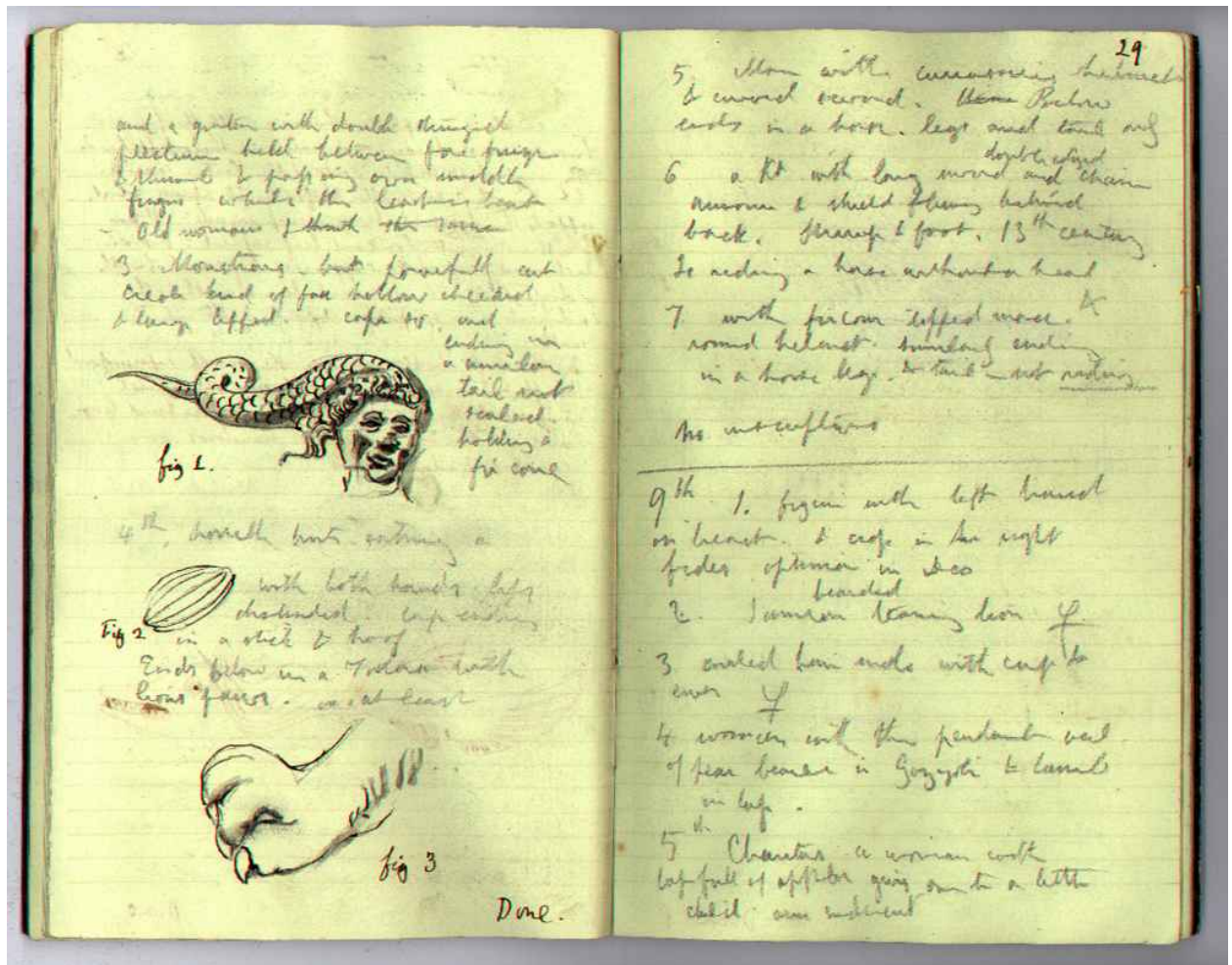


Fig. 1.5. *Palace Book*. 29L-29. *The Ruskin Library and Research Center, Lancaster University*.

The fascination of details that offend his notions of Gothic naturalism threatens the very stability of his classification of historical styles (Byzantine, Gothic, or Renaissance), and his conception of the Gothic as a distinct mode of architecture. In the *Palace Book*, for instance, he is evidently troubled by the combination of Gothic vitality and Byzantine convention in the second pillar of the Lower Arcade, for instance: even as he identifies

the birds as Gothic (he describes one as “pluming itself and has one of its feathers between the mandibles of its beak - exquisitely told - one expects to see it raised cutting the next moment” (PB.29L)), he criticizes the carved leaves for lacking the “spring” and strong central ribs (as seen in Noah’s pillar, for instance) he associates with Gothic naturalism. These leaves only feature slight ribs, and an “undulation” that he describes as “luxurious Wrong and bad [sic]” (PB.47L); he identifies this with Byzantine tracery, so that the second pillar exemplifies a transitional state between the Gothic and the Byzantine (in the next section we will explore the impact on this of Ruskin’s conception of the style itself in transitional terms, featuring recessive, emergent, and dominant elements). Yet his censure is fraught with ambivalence: he cannot help admiring the undulation even as he deplores it: drawing it on the notebook and writing below “undulation,” the dips and swells of the word echoing the pattern itself. Even though he excludes this particular “undulation” in *Stones*,²¹ the term itself recurs in his heightened descriptive amalgamations of nature and ornament (he describes with similar ambivalence “the flaming undulations of the wreathed lines of delicate stone, that confuse themselves with the clouds of every morning sky” of late French Flamboyant Gothic, 9.228), and above all in the dips of swells of his own writing as it undulates between abstraction and particularity. Thus, Ruskin’s notes reveal how even – and especially – the details that threaten his classification of the Gothic shape and spur the details of his writing through which he incarnates his sense of the Gothic.

²¹ STONES SECOND CAPITAL. Only three sides of the original work are left unburied by the mass of added wall. Each side has a bird, one web-footed, with a fish; one clawed, with a serpent, which opens its jaws, and darts its tongue at the bird’s breast; the third pluming itself, with a feather between the mandibles of its bill. It is by far the most beautiful of the three capitals decorated with birds (10.378).

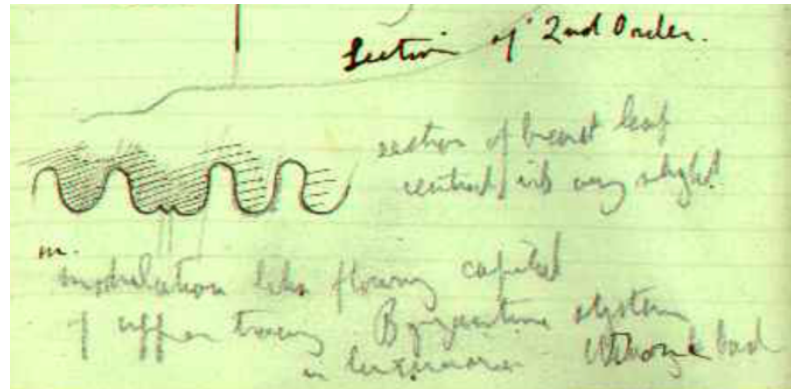


Fig. 1.6. Detail, *Palace Book* 47L. *The Ruskin Library and Research Center, Lancaster University.*

In this scenario, it is hardly surprising that his most eloquent and conceptually compelling evocations of the Gothic are inspired by his encounters with details that undermine his categorization of the Gothic as a distinct mode of architecture. While the pillars of the Lower Arcade of the Ducal Palace are still reasonably amenable to Ruskin's narrative of Gothic emergence, zenith, and decline, the "variously different" pillars of the Upper Arcade, whose lack of centralization he had praised as being definitive of Gothic freedom and individuality, now prove troublesome to that system. As Ruskin records in his M2 Diary, he had initially found the capitals to be "ill-executed" compared with those of the Lower Arcade, and thus seemingly belonging to the encroaching Renaissance style ("I had... suppose[d] the ill-executed capitals to be of later Time" (M2.111)), before revising his opinion till they seem to him part of a "marvellous system of adaptation" that takes into account the viewer's relative perspective: the pillars that "I thought the worst above" actually being "the best when seen from below" (10.293).²² In the ornamental

²² Ruskin revises his opinion after finding similar "vilely cut" capitals in the Byzantine/early Gothic church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, which he views as the source of some of the finest traceries of the Ducal Palace: "it would seem a general practice of the Italian to put careless cutting into the upper stories (M2.111). Later on he progressively revises his view of the "ill-executed" Upper Arcade capitals, which seem to him to be part of they appear "better gradually" as they move towards the Piazzetta angle, "as if the

sculptures of these baffling pillars made for “hard service and distant effect,” he finds a revelation of the conceptual significance and technical virtuosity that can be infused into seemingly marginal details:

Levante, the east wind; a figure with rays round its head, to show that it is always clear weather when that wind blows... Hotro, the south wind; crowned, holding the sun in its right hand: Ponente, the west wind; plunging the sun into the sea: and Tramontana, the north wind (10.429-30).

Ruskin admires these sculptures for they seem to endow with “greater distinctness of idea” the “magnificent verbiage of Milton”: “Thwart of these, as fierce, / Forth rush the Levant and the Ponent winds, / Eurus, and Zephyr; with their lateral noise, / Sirocco, and Libeccio” (*Paradise Lost*, x. 705; cited Ruskin 10.429-30). As with his association of Spenser with the Lower Arcade pillar capitals, Ruskin views these sculptures not as mere illustrations of Milton’s verse, but as equally significant artistic forms that enlighten the reader about (to borrow Ruskin’s earlier term) the “thoughtfulness and fancy” with which Milton invests seemingly marginal poetic details. In a letter to his father, in April 1852, while at work in Venice, Ruskin explains his view of Milton’s “Verbiage”:

I am most struck with his dextrous use of language — he is the very master of Verbiage in its best sense, just as Paul Veronese is a master of costume. It is true that dress does not make a man, neither do words make a thought; but as Veronese and Tintoret [sic] bring highest dignity out of, or rather put it into, furs,

architect expected more people to look at them from the Piazzetta and from between the columns than from the sea” (M2.112). Finally, in *Stones* itself he praises this gradual increase in care of cutting as a “marvellous system of adaptation” (10.293).

tissues and brocades, so Milton puts a play of colour into his wordy tissue which is as majestic as most men's ideas" (10.87n).

Ruskin here conducts a series of transformations as dextrous and dazzling as the play of appearances he praises in painting and poetry. "Verbiage" usually stands for lengthy, technical descriptions that impede the flow of verse – the showy poetic equivalent of what Barthes would later describe as the "reality effect." However, Ruskin views Milton as infusing his "verbiage" with high intellectual significance, expressed through the play of poetic rhythm and resonance, and Ruskin praises, for instance, Milton's "massy line" laying out the divisions of powers: "Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers" (10.86). For Ruskin, Milton's "magnificent Verbiage" is not only a vehicle for incarnating grand ideas by means of technical virtuosity, but also an embodiment of the melding of aesthetic hierarchies that would deny verbal description as well as architectural ornament the high conceptual significance of fine art, and relegate them to the margins of the representational order.

The equivalence Ruskin creates between marginal details of Gothic ornament and canonical works of literature represents a broader breakdown of aesthetic hierarchies that, as we have seen, is part of the emerging "aesthetic regime of art" that, Rancière claims, signifies the destabilization of the classical representational hierarchy between intellectual works of "fine art" and the mechanical craftsmanship of artisans. Ruskin enacts this breakdown when he draws on the intellectually infused "Verbiage" of Milton to represent how the ornamental details of a pillar are imbued with the intellectual significance. In his letter, he identifies Milton's process with the virtuosic "play of colour" of "highest dignity" and grandeur by the artist. Tintoretto and Van Dyck were

masters of Venetian and Flemish painting respectively, whose work was often unfavorably compared to the more linear (and thus more Classical) work of the Florentine masters; Ruskin's appreciation of them recalls his praise for Titian's Bacchus and Ariadne in *Modern Painters*; he also famously praises the use of color in Gothic and Byzantine architecture, 10.86). Through the shifting network of figuration and comparison he creates between ornamental Gothic details, Miltonic "Verbiage," and painterly "play of color," Ruskin reevaluates the representation of seemingly marginal elements as pleasurably shifting, synesthetic representational modes that are nevertheless capable of high intellectual expression.

The concept of "play" is essential to Ruskin's synesthetic aesthetics that dissolves representation hierarchies. Isobel Armstrong describes play as a form of aesthetic "mediation" between the self and the world that creates "an intra-subjective space in which meanings are renegotiated," where the circulation of multiple and contradictory perspectives destabilizes established hierarchies and creates new, non-hierarchical modes of experience (*Radical Aesthetic* 39). The details of Ruskin's writing realize this play-space in the interfusion between the intellectual "play of color," Miltonic "Verbiage" and Gothic ornament, which, as forms based on formal and intellectual dynamism rather than fixity, embody and enact the dissolution of aesthetic categories.

Locating the Gothic in details that do not exemplify it entirely inspires Ruskin's own virtuosity. The problem of definition posed by the uniqueness and diversity of Gothic decorations comes across in his attempts to systematize the Gothic by arranging the pillars of the DP arcades into orders. In his M2 Diary, he attempts to sketch out orders of the DP shafts based on the leafage in their capitals – and promptly finds it necessary to

ceaselessly nuance and refine his orders in keeping with the individual variations on the capitals, or the recurrence of similar leafage on capitals far apart from each other.²³ The impact of Ruskin's attempt to arrange the pillar capitals into distinct orders is felt in the shape and sense of Ruskin's argument of the Gothic, which finds its ordering principles in openness and indeterminacy rather than finality and strict distinctions.

The Nature of "*Gothicness*"

The live formal and conceptual indeterminacies that Ruskin identifies in Gothic details shapes his sense of the Gothic as an aesthetic whose "vitality" inheres in its very resistance to categorization and abstraction. In a letter to his father in February 1852, written while working on *Stones* in Venice and evidently attempting – in vain – to compose architectural styles into distinct stages, Ruskin uses the image and history of language to figure the difficulty of his task:

I have had great difficulty in defining Gothic, the fact being that to define an architectural style is like defining a language — you have pure Latin and impure Latin in every form and stage, till it becomes Italian and not Latin at all. One can say Cicero writes Latin and Dante Italian; I can say that Giotto built Gothic and Michael Angelo Classic; but between the two there are all manner of shades, so

²³ For instance, Ruskin distinguishes the "1st Order" as containing "breast leaves" (eight smaller leaves between the eight larger ones),²³ but then each of the pillars he classifies under this (the 3rd, 6th, 13th, 16th and 20th capitals) have individual variations: while the breast leaf of the 3rd capital, for instance, is "more delicate than in any of the others" (M2.94), those of the 20th capital are "wavy and varied and studied from nature" (M2.95), while the breast leaves of of the 23rd are already falling into the Renaissance, being "more elaborate and heavy and more classical i.e. less natural" (M2.95). The range of leaves within the 1st order itself, from rude beginnings to Gothic flowering to lifeless Renaissance regularity and artificiality, already complicate the single category into which they are classified. Ruskin encounters similar problems with his successive orders which compel him to complicate those orders: he subdivides the 2nd Order (with the breast leaves enlarged in the first division but "merely incised" in the second, M2.97), and openly acknowledge the transitional nature of the 30th, 31st, and 32nd pillars, which are "difficult to place" in the 3rd order in which he finally places them.

that one cannot say ‘here one ends and the other begins’ (10:180n).

The metaphor of language enables Ruskin to figure architectural styles as evolving by finely imperceptible stages, until distinctions between those styles are blurred. This transitional mutability and indeterminacy form the core of the Gothic itself. Though his subject is ostensibly “the universal or perfect type of Gothic,” this is revealed to be a precarious and qualified concept characterized by its indefinite nature: it is never found in a pure state, as it were, but only in hybrid architectural particulars that defy classification into ‘pure’ or distinct categories. Even as Ruskin conceptualizes “*Gothicness*” as a distinct “character” that makes buildings Gothic, he acknowledges that it can only be found in buildings that combine Gothic features with non-Gothic features:

[E]very building of the Gothic period differs in some important respect from every other; and many include features which, if they occurred in other buildings, would not be considered Gothic at all; so that all we have to reason upon is merely, if I may be allowed so to express it, a greater or less degree of *Gothicness* in each building we examine. And it is this Gothicness, —the character which, according as it is found more or less in a building, makes it more or less Gothic, —of which I want to define the nature (10.181).

Ruskin’s attempts to define the nature of Gothic are spurred by his awareness of the ultimate impossibility of doing so. That “*Gothicness*” paradoxically inheres in buildings that also contain non-Gothic features reflects its nature as a distinct “essence” that is nevertheless defined by hybridization or adulteration. This hybridization is not only exemplified by the various details of Gothic ornament in which Ruskin locates the essence of Gothicness – ornamental details that, as we have seen in the previous section, defy categorization by combining several styles and modes – but also in the buildings

themselves that contain non-Gothic features, so that Gothicness becomes a matter of degree rather than of kind: “We cannot say ... that a building is either Gothic or not Gothic ... We can only say that it is more or less Gothic, in proportion to the number of Gothic forms which it unites” (10.152). By highlighting how every Gothic building departs in its own unique way from any sort of fixed blueprint, Ruskin makes the buildings themselves into irregular, hybrid details that comprise and define the abstract principle of “Gothicness.”

Through this paradox, where the most Gothic building may contain non-Gothic elements, Ruskin undermines perfection as an aesthetic standard, as it was in neoclassical aesthetics. The hostility of neoclassical writers towards detail continues neoclassical identification of the Gothic with the proliferation of details that violate the coherence and decorum of classical art. Reynolds himself denounced “dry, Gothick, and insipid manner” of early Italian painting for “attend[ing] to the minute accidental discriminations of particular and individual objects” (*Discourses* 7). John Dryden, in his translation of Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy’s Latin poem *De Arte Graphica*, declared, “All that has nothing of the Ancient gust, is call’d a barbarous or Gothique manner” (119). It is in response to identifications of the Gothic with barbarous irregularity that Goethe and his followers conceptualized the Gothic as the realm of irregular forms that express, and rouse, intense subjective experiences, which would go on to be the basis of aesthetics as a realm of intense affective experience. Ruskin’s revaluation of neoclassical aesthetics is part of this Romantic tradition: even as he accepts the association of the Gothic with “barbarousness,” he reconceives Gothic imperfection as expressive of the freedom and inventiveness of the medieval Gothic artisan:

Gothic builders never suffered ideas of outside symmetries and consistencies to interfere with the real use and value of what they did. If they wanted a window, they opened one; a room they added one... utterly regardless of any established conventionalities of external appearance, knowing (as indeed it always happened) that *such daring interruptions of the formal plan would rather give additional interest to its symmetry than injure it* (10.212; my emphasis).

Ruskin redefines “symmetry,” a core value of neoclassicism aesthetics, in keeping with the free expressivity of the Gothic artisan, who discards external strictures on form in favor of his own sense of necessity and infinite fancy. In creating “daring interruptions” that broke up the formal symmetry of the building, Ruskin argues, the Gothic builders paradoxically effected a truer, richer “symmetry” that adds “interest” to the structure through its whimsical independence and richness of imagination. The “interruptions” that break up the surface and outline of the building are in fact the truest expressions of Gothic freedom and fancy. The result is an architecture that is vitally alive precisely because it has no fixed form determined by external strictures of harmony, but flows along the courses determined by the artisan’s inner fancy or felt necessity: “Undefined in its slope of roof, height of shaft, breadth of arch, or disposition of ground plan, it can shrink into a turret, expand into a hall, coil into a staircase, or spring into a spire, with undegraded grace and unexhausted energy... subtle and flexible like a fiery serpent” (10.212). Thus, Ruskin boldly declares is “not only the best, but the *only rational* architecture, as being that which can fit itself most easily to all services, vulgar or noble” (10.211-2; original emphasis). Ruskin’s Gothic thus become the exemplification of the new understanding of aesthetics – beginning from the writings of Goethe, and flowering

in the astounding aesthetics of Hegel – that places individuality and expressivity at the core of aesthetic order.

Nowhere are these “daring interruptions” more evident than in the case of the ornamental details of the Gothic. “Gothic ornament,” Ruskin writes, “stands out in prickly independence, and frosty fortitude, jutting into crockets, and freezing into pinnacles; here starting up into a monster, there germinating into a blossom, anon knitting itself into a branch” (10.240). Each grotesque detail – both in its individual “interruption” of classical symmetry and in being part of the imperfect growing whole of the building – is an expression of the richly personal imagination of an individual worker, who maintains his independent identity within the whole of the building.

“Jutting... freezing... germinating”: Ruskin’s choice of verbs characterizes the activity of Gothic ornament in terms of the naturalism that is key to the vitality of the Gothic. As Jonah Siegel observes, Ruskin is “too metaphorically self-conscious, especially at names, for us to take the ‘nature’ of Gothic for anything so simple as its ‘character’ or ‘temperament’... nature becomes the standard that saves Gothic architecture at once from its Roman Catholic associations and from the attacks of the heirs of neoclassicism” (*Desire* 209). Nature – both as a model for form and ornament and as a principle of organicism, or adherence to genuine necessity or interest as opposed to artificial architectural rules – becomes the basis for a vindication of Gothic imperfection, of its “Savageness” and “Changefulness.” The very crudeness and irregularity of Gothic detail, with no one detail like another, and every single one deviating from Classical harmony, is in keeping with the idea of organic life, perpetually changing, heedless of the requirements of external symmetry. Ruskin further develops the

relationship between imperfection and organic wholeness by identifying it with change, which he argues is both the principle of life and the dominant ethos of the age. To be perfectly still is to expire, whereas a living body is in a continual state of progress and change: Ruskin gives the example of a foxglove blossom, “a third part bud, a third part past, a third part in full bloom,” which exemplifies life itself in all its changing irregularity and perpetual incompleteness (10.171). The organic quality of naturalistic Gothic ornament lies not only in the faithful evocation of natural life forms, but also in its newness *per se*, rather than a specific new form. Thus, the Gothic spirit breaks the tyranny of stasis in art through the invention of “a series of forms of which the merit was, not merely that they were new, but that they were *capable of perpetual novelty*” (10.208). The pointed arch of the Gothic, for instance, is “not merely a bold variation from the round, but it admitted of millions of variations in itself,” for unlike the round arch of the preceding Romanesque architecture, the angles and proportions of a pointed arch can be adjusted infinitely, evincing vigor and variation in every touch.

The “perpetual novelty” of Gothic detail, which calls for active thought and inventiveness in its creator, makes him an “artist” as well as a “worker,” thereby undoing the divide between the artist and the artisan enshrined in Reynolds’s *Discourses*. This renders the Gothic, in its imperfection, superior to the Classical symmetries of Greek art, the identical pediments and capitals of which require only a narrow mechanical focus. Ruskin’s fantasy of the artist-worker not only reverses the equation of Greek symmetry with freedom in neoclassical aesthetics and idealist aesthetic philosophy, but also enables him to indict industrialized production in Victorian society that turns workers into unnatural, fragmented beings that are the direct opposite of embodied detail: “It is not,

truly speaking, the labor that is divided; but the men:— Divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin, or the head of a nail” (196). The medieval worker thus functions as a ‘good,’ embodied, detail, combining his mental and mechanical skills in the service of larger artistic wholes. However, the modern English worker, like the ancient Greek worker before him, functions as a parody of embodied detail: being fragmented himself, he is incapable of fulfilling larger schemes of wholeness.

At the same time, however, as if to contain the power of detail he has unleashed, Ruskin insists that the value of Gothic details ultimately depends on their fulfillment of a larger whole. Accordingly, he strains to envision his idealized medieval worker as an animate detail *within the larger scheme of wholeness* he embodies. The worker’s artistic independence only reaches “fulfillment” within a larger servitude to the dictates of design – and to the master dictating the design. Robert Hewison writes: “the task of Ruskinian workers is to live with a vigorous but satisfied sense of their proper place, not to revel in self-asserting individuality” (50), where the value and scope of the detail is ultimately dependent on its formation and fulfillment of a greater centrality of being, of which Gothicism is another name: “Fragments full of imperfection,” writes Ruskin, “and betraying that imperfection in every touch, indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole” (10.160).

The power struggle, as it were, between the part and the whole in the Gothic is played out in Ruskin’s writing, which is shaped by his attempts to delimit the power of particularity even as he enhances it. This systole and diastole of freedom and containment

drives the details of his own writing, which comes across most strongly in a wistful visual fantasy – a soaring, lyrical flight of fancy, in which the reader is asked to “imagine a bird’s-eye view of the globe:

We know the differences [between countries] *in detail*, but we have not that broad glance and grasp which would enable us to feel them in their fulness. We know that gentians grow on the Alps, and olives on the Apennines; but we do not enough conceive for ourselves that variegated mosaic of the world's surface which a bird sees in its migration, that difference between the district of the gentian and of the olive (10.186; my emphasis).

Ruskin’s richly realized flight of fancy is above all a fantasy of perception, and is compromised from the beginning by the impossibility of achieving the requisite wholeness of vision. Through the vivid details of his writing, Ruskin invites the reader to conceive the unattainable duality of vision, global yet hyper-particular, that is keenly attentive to the shifting, mutually constitutive dialectic between the part and the whole, and in the way wholes are comprised and animated by unique individual parts. More than anywhere else, it is in the details of his writing – keenly vivid, and yet shaped by the search of a whole – that Ruskin’s Gothic is incarnated.

Ruskin’s prescriptive definition of “Naturalism” – “the love of natural objects for their own sake, and the effort to represent them frankly, unconstrained by artistical laws” (10.182) – incarnates the contradictions of his thought: it is after all a free yet faithful pursuit of natural forms seemingly unrestrained by composition. Sally Shuttleworth identifies focus on “the interdependence of the whole, rather than the freedom of the parts, and the necessity for gradual cumulative growth rather than the infinite potentiality

for change” as the hallmarks of organic theory. We see Ruskin’s adherence to this model of organicism in his argument of the naturalism of Gothic detail. The infusion and subordination of Gothic detail to a higher purpose distinguishes it from those details that are purely mechanistic in their imitation of nature, as Ruskin determines Dutch art to be. Dutch artists, he complains, merely render details faithfully, for their own sake – a “sky of true tone”, a “gleam of sunshine” – without shaping and subordinating them in keeping with a higher moral or aesthetic purpose.

Yet, as in the case of the Denner-like details described in *Modern Painters*, it is in his proscription of details rendered in the spirit of irresponsible indulgence that Ruskin indulges his own fascination with detail. In his censure of the “Sensualists”, who depict human weakness and vice for its own sake, Ruskin singles out Bartolomé Murillo’s “Beggar Boys Eating Grapes and Melon,” and trains his gaze on one detail – “the grey dust engrained in the foot”, which instead of illustrating a moral lesson, only “thrust[s] ... degradation into the light”. It is Ruskin at his most obsessive, at once spellbound and repulsed by the power of detail that can render a world of unwholesomeness as vividly as it can the merits of foliated design (193-4). This is not an open avowal of freedom, as in the case of Hegel who saw in Murillo’s beggar boys the state of freedom and indifference that Schiller attributed to the Greek gods – a radical conjunction that is the basis of Hegel’s free “Romantic” aesthetics. Ruskin, however, can savor this freedom only in the act of proscribing it.

That Ruskin’s details constantly evade his efforts at containment is suggested by his instructions to the reader for identifying the Gothic at the end of “Nature.” These principles are characterized by the contradictions of his efforts to simultaneously attend

to – even indulge in – details as richly personal and expressive forms in their own right, while also containing them into a whole. Thus, the reader is advised to ensure that the Gothic building be “irregular, its different parts fitting themselves to different purposes, no one caring what becomes of them” while also checking if it seems to be the creation of “strong men” of “broad vision” who balanced their “roughness, and largeness, and nonchalance” with the “exquisite tenderness” that reveals the afore-mentioned divine grasp of the whole (10.268).

What does one make of such contradictory efforts? One way of interpreting them is by developing a practice of reading where the difference between close and distant reading is blurred: where one is required to be keenly attentive to details, while also drawing back to construct them into conceptual wholes that are nevertheless responsive to the particulars of embodiment. This is of course a task realized in the attempt rather than the completion of it for most readers: as Stephen Arata notes with bemused admiration: “looking intensely is productive only when accompanied by a vision capable of ranging over fields of learning and information that may be activated by a particular text but are, strictly speaking, nowhere in that text” (675). As in the case of Ruskin’s “Gothicness” itself, the import of his instructions may lie in their contradiction: the necessarily incomplete nature of the task Arata describes requires one to maintain a critical self-awareness, to read and revise oneself as one reads details. Self-conscious subjectivities can be generated in the gap between general and particular, between theoretical abstractions and the particulars of practice. In this case, Ruskin’s art of reading (in) detail becomes the art of creating critics.

Or in keeping with Ruskin's dialectical objectivity and respect for alterity, these critics might blur the boundary between the creative and the critical, intensifying the underlying subjectivity of Ruskin's creation of details in ways of which he might not have approved. One such reader is Proust, with whom we began this chapter, and who by now has finally located his figure in the portal of Rouen Cathedral. Moved by its enduring appeal, soliloquizes on it, claiming that by making it into a detail for viewers such as Proust, Ruskin rescues it from "a death which seems even more final than other deaths – disappearance into numerical infinity under the leveling of likeness" (109). Proust himself is the modernist master of the subjective, capable of germinating from a madeleine an arborescence of remembered personal associations. With the detail – the same, adding his own subjectivity to it in the process of soliloquizing. In this he can be said to paradoxically consummate the richly personal nature of Ruskin's details, albeit in a direction Ruskin might not have envisaged or supported.

Stopped Leaks and Littlenesses: Details in the Poetry of Robert Browning

In August 1856, shortly after the publication of *Modern Painters IV* – where he had famously praised Robert Browning’s “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church” (1845) as distilling the sensual excess and spiritual poverty that he himself associated with the Renaissance in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3) – John Ruskin wrote to the poet to apologize for his self-admitted “mangling” of Browning’s poem. “I was so ashamed of the way I had mangled that poem of yours that I dared not look you – even by letter in the face – for some time afterwards” (DeLaura 335). A perusal of his excerpt of Browning’s poem in *Modern Painters* reveals the mangling to be very extensive indeed. Of his excerpt of lines 10-79, nearly twenty-five lines are missing – single lines, fragments of lines, as well as substantial chunks.¹ Ruskin explains to the reader of *Modern Painters* that the omissions are intentional: “I miss fragments here and there not needed for my purpose” of illustrating “the worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin” of the “Renaissance spirit” (5.447). So it baffling, given this assertion, that Ruskin chooses to omit precisely those lines that are particularly apposite to the illustration of Renaissance “love of art, of luxury.” The omitted lines primarily comprise the Bishop’s enraptured deathbed dilations on specific ornamental features he envisages for his tomb: the precise “[p]each-blossom” hue of the marble, “the rare, the ripe/ As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse,” 29-

¹ As indicated by the explanatory note on this letter at the Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University, the omissions include lines 30-50, and lines 61, 69-71, and 75, as well as part of line 29.

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30), the naughtily elaborated glimpse of one Pan “Ready to twitch the Nymph’s last garment off” (61) on the frieze, and above all, the description, unforgettable in its concentration of cruelty, sensuality, and irreligiosity, of the lump of *lapis lazuli* reposing between his knees: “Big as a Jew’s head cut off at the nape / Blue as a vein o’er the Madonna’s breast” (43-4). In their sensuous surfeit, the Bishop’s verbal details handily illustrate the mentality of a sacrilegious prelate whose appreciative greed has, if anything, been whetted by the awareness of imminent death, and who chooses to expend his last moments in dilating on lavish material adornments for his tomb. So why does Ruskin omit precisely those lines that would appear most illustrative of his argument? And what does this omission of these apposite details reveal about the poetry that he praises as distilling the essence of Renaissance “worldliness”?

Ruskin’s reluctance to include the Bishop’s descriptive details might be attributed to the fact that these details are less amenable to the purposes of his argument than they might appear. Critics have long recognized that Browning’s representation of the Renaissance is not nearly as condemnatory as Ruskin’s. The denigration of Renaissance art and architecture is key to Ruskin’s famous vindication of Gothic architecture in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), where he reframes Renaissance aesthetic qualities that were most admired in contemporary, neoclassical-influenced discourses – its classical symmetry and lavish ornament – as sins of pagan affectation and unfeeling coldness. In particular, Ruskin looks to the treatment of details in both architectures to prove his argument. While Gothic architecture features irregular and individually unique ornamental details that express the freedom and joy of the Gothic carver, and form an imperfect totality more alive and full of feeling than the external symmetries of

classicism, Renaissance ornamental details encapsulate in miniature its sin of “indulgence” – of “grant[ing] to the body what it withdr[aws] from the heart,” by proliferating emptily, devoid of the religious feeling that characterizes the Gothic (11.77-78). Significantly, Ruskin’s particular indignation is reserved for Renaissance tombs, whose sculptors are so lacking in piety and good taste as to crowd out the central effigy with a proliferation of sensual details, thus “disguis[ing] the sarcophagus with delicate sculpture” (11.82). But the richly described details of Browning’s Bishop present a different view: their sensuousness is laden with significance and feeling, for the Bishop reposes his hope for immortality in them. By rendering these details from the Bishop’s point of view, Browning ensures that the reader’s moral judgment of the Bishop’s “venality and shocking perversion of Christianity” is in tension with his “sympathy,” or sympathetic imagination, of the Bishop’s “undeniable taste for magnificence” (Langbaum 531; see Tucker 1994 28). In this context, Browning’s poetic details encapsulate and enact his dramatic monologue’s evocation of contradictory responses in his readers, and the frustration of any single argument or judgment – hence their unsuitability for Ruskin’s argument. Key to this process is the relation between detail and subjectivity, more unpredictable and ambiguous than direct characterological correspondence: instead of exposing the Bishop’s character for condemnation, Browning’s details render any single judgement on Bishop’s character difficult.

Browning’s use of details to exacerbate indeterminacy enacts the broader contradictions underlying detail as an aesthetic category. Far from being a given entity that is synonymous with minuteness and marginality, details functions as forms of ambivalence and disruption. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the term “detail” is

derived from the French *détailler* (meaning to cut or to carve), so that details are not self-evident entities, but perceptually created or ‘carved’ from its surroundings by a subject. Daniel Arasse highlights the irrecoverable nature of this subject when he terms details an “excessively subjective” phenomenon (12). While the perceiver finds some intense personal – and ultimately elusive – significance or pleasure embodied in a specific aspect of the tableau before him, which he proceeds to make into a detail, the specific reasons and motivations that guide the “point de vue du ‘détaillant’” (the gaze of the one who ‘makes the detail’) remains elusive: “What happens in those privileged moments in which a detail makes itself seen?” (12). Lynn Festa argues that details create a “complex interplay between subject and object” that “reach into the domain of the objective” and “into the very core of private desires” (Festa 452). But we have already seen in the chapter on Ruskin how “objectivity” itself is inseparable from the increasing awareness of subjectivity as a distorting force to be suppressed. Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston explain how the nineteenth-century pursuit of objectivity required “the negating of subjectivity by the subject,” so that empirical practices aimed at cultivating objectivity – such as the observation of details – paradoxically intensified the self they are intended to suppress (Galison and Daston 204). Conversely, due to its suppression, subjectivity itself does not exist as a unified, coherent entity, but is dispersed in the details it engenders. *Verbal* details highlight this self-objectification of subjectivity, as they are created by the speaker himself in the medium of his own words, rather than perceived in a scene. This power is made explicit by the descriptive details of Browning’s Bishop, for they do not exist in fact, but are *imagined* by him on his future tomb. In other words, the Bishop’s

subjectivity is at once represented and exposed to interrogation in the hyper-particularized and elaborate details that he incises in language.

This self-objectification of subjectivity has a formal dimension. The mutually constitutive relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in details is formally realized as the interplay of autonomy and embedment: the detail functions as an aesthetic whole that is also being embedded in, and disrupting, the larger wholes it comprises. By being imbued with the intimate meaning of the creator of detail, the detail has claims to formal autonomy and significance at variance with the emblematic meanings of the larger tableau: as Lynn Festa writes, “[if]n carving a shape, one defines its edges, granting the part or detail a certain autonomy countermanded by its ostensibly dependent relation to the totality to which it supposedly belongs” (451). In other words, the creation of details effects a formal disturbance in the tableau by offering meanings at odds with its overall meaning. In Browning’s poem, the intensely, disruptively subjective nature of the material details is realized in the way the Bishop dilates on them and enlarges them into aesthetic wholes that take over his tomb in his imagination.

Browning’s association of an intensely creative subjectivity with highly particularized details illuminates Ruskin’s contradictory attraction to and resistance to his work. For Ruskin’s admiration and inclusion of Browning’s poem attests to a structural similarity he perceives in their work. As we have seen in the first chapter, Ruskin was a himself great champion of details in art. Beginning with the details of landscape painting and poetry in *Modern Painters I* and continuing with the details of Gothic architecture, Ruskin sought to expand and reconfigure aesthetic hierarchies going back to neoclassical art theories, to include a measure of natural details that he insisted was necessary to the

artistic expression of the truth of nature. And yet Ruskin's empirical pursuit of the truth of nature was paradoxically produced by – and intensified – his awareness of his own intensely desiring, visual subjectivity. Ruskin's fascination with, and ultimate failure to contain the proliferation of details reveals the impress of his subjective desires on his empirical pursuit of detail. Browning, however, emancipates details free from their containment within a unified aesthetic or mimetic ideal, when he chooses the very details of Renaissance art that Ruskin characterized as taking over the whole artwork, in defiance of the requirements religious feeling or of truth to nature. We might posit that this proximate, yet far from identical characterization of details draws Ruskin to Browning's work, while also somewhat repulsing him. Browning fulfils the latent subjective power of details present in Ruskin's thought – in a way Ruskin himself would have found insupportable, given his commitment to objectivity. Browning associates this greater autonomy and particularization of Renaissance details (compared to Ruskin's Gothic details) with subjectivities that are free from the constraints imposed by Ruskin's commitment to objectivity. This process is evident above all in his long poem *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), which is larded with minute details that are not clearly relevant to the poem's central narrative or characterological concerns, and that prolong its central "murder-case" across twelve books and the words of nine different speakers.

In this chapter, I argue that Browning employs the appearance of extreme objectivity engendered by details to in order to constitute and interrogate highly imaginative subjectivities. I take for my prime example his long poem *The Ring and the Book*, the form and content of which is determined by the association between subjectivity and the proliferation of details. The poem notoriously gives multiple and

conflicting accounts of a “Roman murder-case” (I.121). The monologues themselves function as highly autonomous details that disrupt the whole they comprise by ironizing the different perspectives in play. Each monologue itself features a profusion of descriptive details that make explicit their creation by perceiving subjects – even as they open those subjectivities to fragmentation and interrogation, by highlighting the reanimation of subjectivities by another subject (Browning’s Poet) who is himself a construct, and who forms them by ambiguously infusing his subjectivity with historical materials whose truth is open to question. Browning flamboyantly uses detail not to solve the “murder-case” – the identity of the criminal is not in doubt – but to exacerbate the blurring of fact and fiction, subjectivity and objectivity. The truth ultimately evades the reader who, after performing twelve layers of analysis, is left to draw his own conclusion, with the understanding that it remains provisional.

The relative autonomy of details and of subjectivities in Browning’s poetry necessitates a revision of established critical traditions surrounding his verse, which recognize – and criticize – the profusion of richly detailed descriptions of sensuous matter as well as of extreme inner states in his work without necessarily connecting them. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics linked the wealth of detail in Browning’s poetry to the aesthetic and ethical standards of the era of which his poetry was regarded as a peculiarly characteristic product. In his eponymous essay on what he calls “the poetry of barbarism,” George Santayana views the unregulated profusion of detail in the work of Browning as the manifestation of a “barbaric” “disdain of perfection” that is symptomatic of the materialism of his age, which fails to impose an overarching moral and aesthetic vision upon the multiplicity of inchoate sensations and ideas to which it is

so keenly receptive (208-9). G.K. Chesterton, more appreciative, argues that the “terrible importance of detail” in Browning’s poetry enacts his deliberate and highly original formal experiments that express the moral relativism of his scientific and democratic era (165). More recent critics have come to connect Browning’s representations of subjectivity and objectivity: in their sophisticated and compelling readings, Herbert Tucker and Isobel Armstrong view Browning’s details as a mode of interrogating lyric subjectivity by situating it amid a historical and material context. Yet such criticism still depends on a divide between lyric subjectivity and a historical and material objectivizing context, with details being strictly identified with the latter. However, as we have seen, a detail is not an inert entity, but is created by the perceptual activity of a subject. It encapsulates in miniature, as it were, the broader interrogation of the divide between subjectivity and objectivity that began in Romantic aesthetic philosophy and was dramatized and intensified in Victorian literary works. Through his poetic details, Browning puts pressure on this divide by exaggerating it, revealing how the utmost subjectivity is implicated in the utmost objectivity: the richly rendered descriptions in his monologues turn out be the creation of highly self-conscious and imaginative subjectivities at their most creative.

The vertiginous acceleration of the mutually constitutive relationship between subjectivity and objectivity enacted in Browning’s details also compels a revaluation of the place of his poetry in nineteenth-century aesthetics. As we have seen above, Browning’s poetry, with its proliferation of details in seeming disregard for the strictures of formal harmony, has been viewed as being singularly unaesthetic (Santayana 208-9); in this it can be viewed as emblematic of the supposed “aesthetic failure of modern life”

(Siegel “Victorian Aesthetics” 569), with its everyday life and humble details that do not seem conducive to the creation of great art. Behind such a response to Browning we detect an idea of art as “ideal,” pertaining to a unity of being, a spontaneous sense of oneness with the totality of existence, which finds formal embodiment in the harmonious relationship between form and content (Santayana 166-8). But as we have covered in the introduction and the previous chapter, recent work in the history of aesthetics, above all by Jacques Rancière, have uncovered how it is the perception of the *break* in this idea of harmony in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that made it necessary to ask what art is, and gave rise to the idea of art as a realm of autonomous experience (*Aisthesis* ix-xi). While Rancière does not cover Browning’s poetry (or Victorian literature in general), we can see Browning’s poetry as exemplifying the modern idea of art, which inheres in the lack of fit between form and content. Specifically, his representation of details, with their particularized representations of objectivity, alongside his representation of particularized, inward subjective states, enacts the inadequate relation of form and content that is at the heart of the modern conception of art. However, as I hope to demonstrate, Browning goes even further by directly connecting the internal and external modes of extreme particularization that characterize aesthetic modernity, when he uses details to generate and reveal the subjectivities of his speakers. In this context, Browning’s details in their apparent unaesthetic nature both realize and subvert the core mechanism of aesthetic modernity: the utmost appearance of objectivity generated by, and revealing, the utmost subjective inwardness.

Subjective details, objectified selves

Browning revealed, early in his career, a sophisticated understanding of the use of details to enact a mutually constitutive relationship between subject and object that he would later enact in his poetry. It is this understanding that shapes his delineation of the subjective and the objective poets in his “Introductory Essay” (1851) on Shelley, in terms that subtly undermine this divide, and ultimately conclude with the proposal of a third category of poet who combines both characteristics in his work.

The divide between the subjective and objective poets, Browning informs us, is “not so much from any essential distinction in the faculty of the two poets” – both of whom possess a “fuller perception of nature and man” than their fellow human beings do – but in the specific modes and the purposes to which they embody their perception in their poetry. Thus, both subjective and objective poetry are the embodiments of a poet’s subjective perception: the difference lies in the specific mode of subjectivity that generates that perception.

While the objective poet “endeavor[s] ... to reproduce things external,” his recreation of his perceptions is shaped by his awareness of the “the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men” of which his own perception is a heightened manifestation. Thus, the poet’s subjectivity takes the form of a complex negotiation between his heightened perception on the one hand, and of his awareness of the relatively less percipient subjectivities of his readers. Accordingly, he tempers and shapes his perceptions, giving just as much as his readers can realize in their own imagination: “he is so acquainted and in sympathy with its narrow comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole” (34). To this end, he removes all trace of himself from the appearance of facts he generates.

However, as Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston have argued – and as Browning himself was well aware – objectivity itself can only be achieved by an effort of the will to negate itself: it is the paradoxical “negating of subjectivity by the subject” (Galison and Daston 204). In this light, the act of self-erasure itself becomes the impress of the objective poet. While the subjective poet makes explicit the shaping activity of his subjective perception on the facts he embodies, his subjectivity itself is not a stable, entity, but takes the form of a subject-object relationship, where he takes his own self for his object of “study,” “appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind” of which his subjectivity is the “nearest reflex”. This negotiation shapes his selection and representation of “those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power” (39). While readers might “approach the personality of the poet” through his poetry, the idea of a single, stable personality is complicated by the relationship between his self and the elusive “absolute Mind” that the poet perpetually struggles to approach (38).

Thus, the division between subjective poetry and objective poetry is revealed in the course of the essay to be far from absolute. Renée Fox notes the non-binary nature of this divide when she identifies the relation between subjective poetry and objective poetry Browning’s essay as “a cyclic process — each kind of poetry ultimately leading into the other” (471). As we have seen above, the contours of this cyclical process are built up in the definitions of subjectivity and objectivity poetry proposed by Browning; each category consists of an interplay between subject and object, which produces a tendency in either mode towards the other mode. This mutual tendency is realized in the *third* category of poet, from whom Browning claims “these two modes of poetic

faculty... issue” (42), and whose work mediates the passage from objective to subjective poetry. This third poet appears when the “general eye” has absorbed the raw material of external facts as well as inner spiritual phenomena to the utmost, and desires to learn its “exacter significance.” The third poet accomplishes this by heightening the mutual implication of the appearance of extreme objectivity and externality with that of extreme subjectivity and ideality in his poetry – “intensifying the import of details and rounding the universal meaning” (43). He thus brings the extremity of each mode of poetry closer to the condition of the other, till the divide between them is blurred. On the one hand, poetic details are subjected to a degree of ‘subjectivization’ – that is, they are imbued by the poet with higher spiritual significance. On the other hand, the poem’s “universal meaning” is subjected to a “rounding” – a term that already anticipates the “rondure brave” of the ring in *The Ring and the Book*, and that may signify a process of “rounding off,” a tempering of universality (much like the crude gold or its correlative “pure crude fact” that goes into the ring) to make it more amenable to concrete representation alongside details. The third kind of poet does not choose between details and the poet’s “universal meaning,” but represents them in a reciprocal relationship, using each to convey and intensify the effect of the other.

For Browning, details not as given entities, but representations that are created by a subject. As such, they will inevitably reveal the poetic conceptions and ideas out of which they have in part been constituted – thereby making explicit the fact of their created nature. The view that details can be a means to represent subjective and spiritual significances is a key tenet of Romantic aesthetics, as we have seen in the discussion of William Hazlitt’s “particularized ideal” in the opening chapter. By insisting that natural

details are not only not incompatible with the representation of artistic ideals, but also embody those ideals, Hazlitt ushers details into the representational order from which they were previously excluded by neoclassical theorists such as Joshua Reynolds, who insisted on the excision of natural details to attain ideal forms and general truths (*Discourses* 76). Hazlitt's breakdown and reconfiguration of this classical order to include details is an early instance of what Jacques Rancière terms "the aesthetic regime of art": the disruption and reconfiguration of the representational order to include previously excluded forms (such as details) that did not adhere to classical ideals of symmetry and harmony, but that now came to be associated with the idea of artistic creation and aesthetic response precisely because of their non-adherence to those norms (*Aisthesis* xii). The new valorization of traditionally excluded entities is central to the emergence of the modern idea of art itself as a realm of autonomous sensation and affective response: "Art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it" (x). Details encapsulate the contradictions of this aesthetic realm in miniature, by at once functioning as semi-autonomous aesthetic entities that express their maker's subjectivity, and in particular his "intimate meaning," as Daniel Arasse writes (2), while also forming part of a larger mimetic totality with claims to the representation of reality. Hazlitt represents a relatively early stage of this regime: he seeks to reconcile details with ideal forms through his particularization of the neoclassical ideal, where, he insists each detail embodies and is imbued with the sense of the whole, and which forms the core of Romantic organicism. With Ruskin, this Romantic organic balance begins to fall apart: even as he insists that details form a "stately and unaccusable whole" (10.160), his details of choice – the irregular details of Gothic architecture – are aesthetic wholes that express

the Gothic artisan's subjectivity, and that threaten to destabilize and overwhelm the aesthetic wholes they comprise. Browning, in his turn, discards all attempts at balancing part and whole, by 'emancipating' details – and the subjective expressivity he reads in them – from the demands of formal coherence and empirical truth. Accordingly, he represents the very appearance of objectivity that details convey to originate in the subjectivity of the maker of detail, so that it can be used to represent the subjective inwardness and ideality that the poet puts into his poetry. Browning thus dramatizes the mutually constitutive relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in his characteristic genre – the dramatic monologue – where he uses highly particularized details to represent and interrogate the subjectivity of his speakers.

Recognizing Browning's interplay of subjectivity and objectivity deepens our understanding of the widely acknowledged interrogation of subjectivity in his dramatic monologues (Tucker 1985; Armstrong 1992). In the dramatic monologue, Browning strives to create the third mode of poetry he mentioned in his "Essay," where the subjective and the objective modes of poetry emerge from the same poet and interpenetrate each other. Browning himself famously described the form of his early work *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) as built on a juxtaposition: "though often Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine" (54; see *Disclosure* 150). His characterization of the dramatic monologue as bringing together two traditionally opposed modes of poetry – the dramatic (objective) and lyric (subjective) – has elicited subtle critical readings, particularly by Herbert Tucker and Isobel Armstrong. Both critics view Browning's dramatic monologues as staging the problematization and fragmentation of the Romantic lyric and

lyric subjectivity, by situating it amid a material context that opens it to question. Tucker argues that Browning employs “objectivizing devices” – dramatic tropes that signify a historical and material context – to contextualize lyric utterance “in the interests of character formation” (“Dramatic Monologue” 229). In this context, character itself emerges as an “interference effect between opposed yet mutually informative discourses, between an historical, metonymic text and a symbolic, metaphorical text that adjoins it and jockeys with it for authority” (229-30). Isobel Armstrong, seeking to endow Tucker’s reading of the linguistic interrogation of subjectivity with a material content, traces this interrogation to the socio-cultural anxieties of the Victorian era, which resulted in the “double poem” – epitomized in the dramatic monologue – which employs objectivizing modes that turn “the *subject*’s utterance but the *object* of analysis and critique (12). What both readings have in common, however, is their presumption of a binary between subjectivity and objectivity. To read the two modes as being mutually implicated may nevertheless limit their recognition of the extent to which Browning uses subjective and objective modes to interrogate each other in his poetry. To identify detail with “historical particularity,” or as an “objectivizing device” that serves to interrogate subjectivity, is a promising but ultimately limiting approach, for Browning consistently undermines the divide between subjectivity and objectivity, lyric expression and material history. In his dramatic monologues, he goes on to enact this relation by representing the creation of details by perceiving subjects. In other words, the interrogation of the divide between subjectivity and objectivity is enacted by precisely the forms that are most identified with historical and material context – details – but which Browning represents as the creations of subjectivity at its most imaginative.

Browning's specific use of details goes back to the duality of detail as an aesthetic category. This duality is best explained by Daniel Arasse, who draws on the distinction between the two terms for detail in Italian – the *particolare*, or “small part of a figure, an object or an ensemble” (the usual understanding of detail), and the *dettaglio*, which is “the result or trace of the action of the one who ‘makes the detail’” (11; my translation). While critics have generally read Browning's poetic details – and details in general – only as *particolare* (exemplified by Tucker's choice of term – “historical particularity”), both these meanings come together in Browning's use of detail, through which he creates an appearance of extreme particularity and objective reality that he reveals to be the creation of highly active subjectivities. At the same time, particularization works both ways: the precise extent of subjective creativity – or manipulation – in the rendering of objectivity remains uncertain, so that subjectivity itself is not rendered as a coherent entity separate from the details it creates, but is imperceptibly intermingled in them. Keeping in mind the dramatization and interrogation of subjectivity in the dramatic monologue, details paradoxically become the means to not only reveal the forming power of subjectivity, but also to render it elusive.

Poetic Hegel, Prose Browning

Browning's use of details to create and represent subjectivities can be traced to an aspect of Romantic aesthetic philosophy not usually discussed in relation to his work: the association of highly particularized representations of external reality and of subjectivity. Critics have extensively traced Browning's Romantic allegiances to his representation of lyric subjectivity, while his use of details and other “objectivizing devices” (to borrow Herbert Tucker's phrase) have usually been identified with his contemporary Victorian

influences. This critical divide is built on the presumption of an opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, which is realized in the supposed divide between Romanticism and Victorianism. However, Browning's interrogation of this divide in and through his poetic details has a precedent in Romantic aesthetics. To illuminate this process, I turn to a Romantic thinker not usually associated with Browning, but whose works features the most sophisticated exploration of the mutually constitutive relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in Romantic thought: G.W.F. Hegel.

Links between Hegel's thought – and German philosophy in general – with Browning's work have not received extensive consideration, in part because of Browning's airy dismissal of Hegel in his 1881 letter to Frederick James Furnivall: "As for Hegel — I am rejoiced if our wits should jump — but I never read a word of his — caring as little as you for elaborate metaphysics: I am greatly interested, however, in Mr. Bury's letters. How the grain which one seems to scatter with small result comes up and bears fruit in unguessed places!" (2 October 1881).² While this blanket statement disavows any direct contact with Hegel's work his apt description of "elaborate metaphysics" indicates some awareness, perhaps through cultural osmosis, perhaps through a shared origin in broader Romantic discourse. Certainly, Browning's contemporaries were struck by similarities between his poetry and Hegel's philosophy: the "Mr. Bury" mentioned by Browning was John Bury, a student at Trinity College, Dublin (and later a classical historian), and his "letters" that Browning mentions in include a proof of a paper titled "Browning's Philosophy" (later delivered to the

² This letter is recorded at the Huntington Collection of Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University, Texas ([Huntington] 81166-00 [CK 81166-00]).

Browning Society on 6 May 1882 (*BSP*, I, 259–77), where he compares Browning’s ideas to those of Hegel. Bury is particularly struck by what he terms the “necessity of negation or falsehood” in Browning’s thought, where “Truth of Love, in order to assert itself, requires a medium of negation or falsehood, in contrast with which it may shine out. “Affirmation” by way of “negation,” and “identity” by way of “difference,” strikes him as the “essence” of Hegel’s thought (39). While Bury reposes too much faith in the ultimate triumph of Truth and Love by way of negation, I posit that a richer understanding of the complexities of Browning’s (and Hegel’s) thought can be obtained if we see the gap opened by negation or antithesis as ultimately – even gloriously – irreconciled. The unreconciled negation finds its most concrete and compelling articulation, fittingly enough, in Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835, 1975), where he turns the lack of fit between form and matter, spirit and sensuousness that characterizes aesthetic modernity, with its proliferation of details, into a necessary condition of modern subjectivity and self-awareness.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, in Hegel’s aesthetics it is not the perfect, formal reconciliation of matter and spirit in “Ideal” or Classical art, but *the dissolution* of this reconciliation, the *lack of fit* between matter and spirit in modern or “Romantic” art, which enables the progression of the spirit to the modern condition of self-consciousness. This spiritually generative lack of fit between form and content is manifested above all in the proliferation of details that characterize modern literature and genre painting, each of functions as an aesthetic whole that deviates from the overall harmony of the work of art.

In Romantic art, matter and spirit are no longer locked in perfect embodiment, but develop in relative independence of each other. On the one hand, spirit, having evolved to a higher level of consciousness than can find adequate embodiment in matter, turns inward and takes itself for its own subject, and particularizes itself into specific thoughts, emotions, ideas and so on, which become forms of the spirit in the medium of spirit itself. On the other hand, the inward withdrawal of the spirit leaves external nature free to be realized in its empirical particularity: “In romantic art... where inwardness withdraws itself into itself, the entire material of the external world acquires freedom to go its own way and maintain itself according to its own special and particular character” (I.594). This results in the juxtaposition of two kinds of particularization: the utmost subjective inwardness, manifested in particularized inner thoughts and subjective states, and the utmost particularized appearance of the external world. Thus, both the proliferation of details in modern art (particularly in modern literature and genre painting) and the representation of subjectivity enter representation together in “Romantic” art. The juxtaposition of subjectivity and particularity is the product of the inadequate relation between subject and object, spirit and sensuous matter that is key to the formally imperfect but dynamic nature of modern art.

The relation between subjective inwardness and external details in “Romantic” art is not primarily that of simple, direct correspondence, but is essentially “negative” or contingent. In other words, the self finds no direct embodiment in “Romantic art,” no representation that is adequate to portray its inwardness. Instead, it finds indirect reflection in the very arbitrariness of the juxtapositions of subjective states and the objective world of matter that characterize “Romantic art.” Both these kinds of

representation are creations of “Romantic” artist – the writer of modern literature, the genre painter – whose subjectivity now comes to the fore:

[T]he artist's subjective conception and execution of the work of art... can remain faithful both to the manifestations of spirit and also to the inherently substantial life of nature, even in the extreme limits of the contingency which that life reaches, and can make significant even what is in itself without significance, and this it does through this fidelity and through the most marvellous skill of the portrayal (I.596).

The “Romantic” artist uses his skill and virtuosity to not only create highly particularized semblances of external nature as well as of subjective inwardness, but also to juxtapose them in a way that, while being essentially arbitrary, *appears* necessary and significant. Thus, Romantic virtuosity becomes the impress of the subjectivity of the artist, through which he makes startling juxtapositions (the more unexpected the juxtaposition, the greater the artist’s skill and virtuosity) and yet reconciles them. In poetry, virtuosity takes the form of figurative language – metaphor, image, and simile – that juxtapose fields of semblance and of meaning that do not belong together, but are represented with such skill that it becomes impossible for the reader to imagine them being written otherwise. Through his virtuosity, the Romantic artist imbues with necessity and significance what is inherently contingent and insignificant (much as Dutch genre painting does in the visual field), indirectly manifesting the forming activity of subjectivity: “subjectivity . . . relates itself at the same time to the now unfettered material, to the contingent sensuousness; and this subjectivity has its presentation, its external existence, in this contingent material alone; it shines therein” (1820, Ms. 186; see Rutter 70).

This creation of the appearance of reconciliation where there is none, this imbuing of the insignificant with the appearance of significance and animation, is the condition of “liveliness” (*Lebendigkeit*) that is the “Romantic” answer to the formal beauty and perfection of Classical art. “Romantic” art cannot aspire to formal beauty because of the fundamental irreconciliation between the increasing inwardness of spirit on the one hand, and the nature of modern life on the other, which is not conducive to the creation of great art in the Classical sense. In place of beauty, modern “Romantic” art is characterized by “liveliness.” Defined variously in Hotho’s text of Hegel’s lectures as the quality of “vitality” or “ensoulness,” “liveliness” is the dialectical dynamism that Hegel considers essential to life itself, which “consists precisely in positing contradiction in itself, enduring it, and overcoming it” (Hegel I.120). This process finds its most sophisticated, concrete form in art. Being a condition of “ongoing struggle” to overcome “contradiction,” liveliness in art requires a looser and more dynamic fit between form and content, matter and spirit, than does beauty.³ The “looseness” of liveliness inheres in its engagement with unreconciled form and content: even as the artist creates incongruous juxtapositions, as in the virtuosic treatment of pots and pans in Dutch genre scenes, he does so in such virtuosic terms as to make them appear fitting and pleasing. This making of momentousness, this animation of what is inherently inanimate and significant, is the impress of the artist’s subjectivity, and the result of his utter absorption and involvement in his art: “there is the subjective liveliness with which the artist with his spirit and heart entirely inhabits the existence of such topics according to their whole inner and outer shape and appearance, and presents them to our vision in this animation. In view of these

³ Liveliness is present in Classical art as well, but coincides with its beauty, due to its reconciled and harmonious nature.

aspects we may not deny the name of works of art to the creations of this sphere” (1.596).

Benjamin Rutter views “Romantic” liveliness as an arguably more momentous achievement than beauty, for it creates the semblance of animation and significance in what is precisely its opposite: everyday, bourgeois existence. “the modern artist finds echoes of inwardness and depth in trivial situations precisely because, in the skill and energy of his execution, *he puts them there*” (59).

“Liveliness” manifests the triumph of subjectivity over modern life, which is fundamentally hostile to the creation of art. While in ancient Greece man’s existence was in harmony with his inner self, with the democratic Greek *polis* being essentially an externalization of his inner harmony between nature and reason, modern life is characterized by finitude and entanglement, where man’s existence is delimited by larger social and political institutions that reduce him to a means to an end. Here man finds himself “entangled in the external world, and dependent upon external purposes” (1828, Ms. 68). Instead of realizing man’s inner reconciliation between nature and spirit, modern existence exacerbates that divide. The unreconciled and fragmented nature of modern, bourgeois existence does not lend itself to the creation of ideal art and formal beauty: “[i]t is artistically impossible to invest such subjects with the thoroughgoing harmony of content and form required for beauty because the finitude of everyday life” (Rutter 90-1). Instead of beauty, Romantic art features liveliness, where the Romantic painter or poet employs his virtuosity to imbue the essentially inanimate and deadening subject matter of modernity with the appearance of animation and dynamism.

Hegel envisages the “Romantic” artistic process in intimate and visceral terms, as an infusion of spirit (from the Latin *spiritus*: breath) into dead subject matter: “there is

the subjective vivacity with which the artist with his spirit and heart *breathes life* entirely into the existence of such topics according to their whole inner and outer shape and appearance, and presents them to our vision in this animation” (1.596; my emphasis). It takes little effort to find in descriptions of the primary poetic process in *The Ring* a related account of the Romantic infusion of liveliness and vitality – when, for instance, in the first Book, Browning’s Poet describes his self-appointed mission to breathe life into the past. One of his most memorable images takes a markedly visceral path:

Oh, Faust, why Faust? Was not Elisha once? —
 Who bade them lay his staff on a corpse-face.
 There was no voice, no hearing: he went in
 Therefore, and shut the door upon them twain,
 And prayed unto the Lord: and he went up
 And lay upon the corpse, dead on the couch,
 And put his mouth upon its mouth, his eyes
 Upon its eyes, his hands upon its hands,
 And stretched him on the flesh; the flesh waxed warm (I.760-772).

This is resurrection as resuscitation, as the poet-prophet breathes his own life-force into something that is essentially lifeless. Critics have focused on Browning’s figure of resuscitation as highlighting the inherently limited and subjective nature of his poetic reanimation of historical facts, even as he uses those limits as the basis for further aesthetic experimentation and “generic innovation” (Fox 463-4). This subjective reanimation of fact can be viewed as exemplifying the core mechanism of modern, “Romantic” art: the infusion of external, contingent particulars with the poet’s “subjective liveliness,” the endowing of what is inherently insignificant and lifeless with animation and significance.

Certainly, the reanimation of inherently worthless subject matter was a prevalent evaluation – and criticism – of the plot of *The Ring and the Book*, which Thomas Carlyle

famously called “an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines” (cited in Dowden 255). G.K. Chesterton, more sympathetic, diagnosed Browning’s almost whimsical choice of topic as symptomatic of the moral relativism of the age, which “apotheosiz[es] the insignificant” (165). But Browning’s Elisha metaphor complicates the divide between his inert, base subject matter and subjective liveliness, between “pure, crude fact” and the poet’s imagination. His representation of the reanimation of existing facts and forms, rather than of creation *ex nihilo*, as God does, alerts us to the fact that the representation of those existing ‘objective’ facts is itself an act of the poet’s creative subjectivity. This paradox is highlighted by the conflict between the poet’s use of the figure of resurrection (meaning the rising again of Christ after his death, as well as restoration to original status),⁴ which has greater claims to originality than the ambiguous reanimation it describes, where one does not know if the poet’s reanimated speakers are truly resurrected or are creations of the poet’s own subjectivity. This ambiguity also plays out in the poet’s metaphors of gold and alloy, which blur the divide between the objective fact and subjective fiction they are supposed to represent.

Browning’s use of metaphors to represent and problematize objective “facts” challenges the divide between subjective imagination and the inert and objective matter, which is realized in Hegel’s thought as the generic divide between prose and poetry, with important implications for modernity. Hegel notably identifies unversified text or prose as the verbal medium that gives form to the quotidian and rigidly-regimented finitude of modernity; specifically, he has in mind the unadorned, unimaginative, and analytic linguistic modes in which he considered contemporary scientific and philosophical texts

⁴ *OED*, “resurrection” def. 1 and 3

to be written. He excludes prose from the domain of art, viewing it in opposition to the “Romantic” linguistic art of poetry: “a general rule for prose [is] literal accuracy, unmistakable definiteness, and clear intelligibility, while what is metaphorical and figurative is always relatively unclear and inaccurate” (I.372). As Franco Moretti writes, this is an idea of “prose as work, and, more precisely, as work of analysis” (382); Hegel essentially tethers prose to the singularly unimaginative domain of observation and analysis attached to the scientific, bureaucratic and analytical professions that characterized and regulated everyday life. In particular, prose lacks the capacity of subjective liveliness and virtuosity that is realized through figurative language, and that Hegel considers to be the sole domain of poetry. Ironically, Hegel’s own denial of figurative capacities of prose language is couched in his own highly figurative, even poetic, philosophical prose,⁵ with its superb metaphor for the condition of modernity – the “world of prose,” and its pendant image, “prose of the world” – which combines his cultural conceptions of the banality, entanglement, and finitude of the modern world with its representative literary medium.⁶

For Hegel, poetic figuration traditionally enacts the mastery of prose (and the world of prose) by the poet, who uses figurative language – metaphor, image, and simile – to disrupt the transparency of prose by yoking together startlingly disparate images and meanings. At the same time, however, Hegel envisages poetic virtuosity as also closing

⁵ For more on the poetic qualities of Hegel’s prose, see Rutter 140-47.

⁶ It has been for Hegel’s nineteenth and twentieth-century successors to argue, and for novelists to prove in their works, that prose can be a literary medium as artistically wrought and philosophically invested as poetry, and that the modern condition of spirit entrapped in finitude can be the fit subject matter of art. My third chapter examines how George Eliot puts to virtuosic use the meticulously analytic medium of prose, to depict the subjectivities of characters struggling to realize themselves in the “embroiled medium” of the modern “world of prose” in *Middlemarch*.

this gap between image and meaning, form and content, by giving the juxtaposition the *appearance* of fittingness that reconciles the reader to it: “the simile, like the image and the metaphor, therefore expresses the boldness of the imagination which, having something confronting it-whether a single perceptible object, a specific situation, or a universal meaning-works on it and evinces its power to *bind together things lying poles apart*” (I.411; my emphasis; see Rutter 143-44). Hegel’s ultimately reconciliatory view of poetic figures is part of a broader Romantic attempt to create a correspondence of form and content out of fundamentally unreconciled and disharmonious elements. We see this sensibility articulated by Coleridge’s definition of metaphor in *Biographia Literaria* as “Imagination in action,” which functions through “the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” (174). Browning, however, breaks this attempted reconciliation of image and meaning, instead making explicit their fundamentally unreconciled nature: he uses his poetic figures to *exaggerate* the gap between meaning and image, rather than close it. As we have seen, his metaphor of the resurrection by Elisha only highlights that far from being a process of restoration to original status, as “resurrection” suggests, his poetic reanimation is an ambiguous process where the relative constitution between objective fact and his own subjective imagination is uncertain.

This mismatch between image and meaning is exacerbated by his figuration of the components of the ring figure that is so central to his poem. In his opening, Browning’s Poet famously compares the “pure crude fact” he works upon to gold, which is mingled with “gold’s alloy, “or his fictionalizing imagination. While the gold is initially described as un-smelt – “mere oozings from the mine” - its “primordial” status is soon reversed

with the next metaphor of honey (“oval tawny pendent tear,” I.12). For honey is indeed like gold in its coloring, but is far from unworked, being the result of the hard labor and cunning of bees. The narrator’s description of this honey as it oozes from the honeycomb – “—such mere oozings from the mine, / Virgin as oval tawny pendent tear / At beehive-edge when ripened combs o’erflow,—” (I.11-2) – itself oozes from between the split parts of a longer sentence about gold, and exudes his self-aware cunning industriousness. Similarly, the figuration of the “alloy” – the speaker’s quickening imagination – is volatile. Initially of lesser value than the “gold,” – it exists only to soften gold, and ‘disappears’ during the working process – it is soon described as being even more precious: it is “something else surpassing that [gold], / Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass, / Made it bear hammer and be firm to file” (I.461-3). Being a mysterious mixture of unspecified nature, the alloy’s effect of malleability on the gold is in keeping with its own quicksilver nature as a metaphor. Crude gold or extracted honey; base alloy or priceless imagination: Browning’s metaphors evade fixity of meaning. By emphasizing the gap between the metaphorical image and the meaning conveyed, Browning exacerbates the contradiction inherent in metaphor itself – the ‘is-and-is-not’ copula of which represents the clash between its ‘literal’ and ‘figurative’ meanings, and which Romantic theorists such as Hegel and Coleridge had sought to settle. Browning exacerbates and highlights this gap between literal and figurative meanings through his obtrusively irregular and contradictory juxtapositions. In this context, his metaphor of the ring enacts Aristotle’s observation on the generative gap of image and content in metaphor: “it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh” (1410 b 10, cited Ricoeur 135).

The generation of “something fresh” by way of metaphor receives fresh impetus in the modern world of prose. Drawing on the prosaic themes and techniques associated with the ostensibly unaesthetic and analytic culture of modernity enables Browning to continually generate startling new juxtapositions of form and meaning that constantly refresh the themes and import of his poetry. Indeed, his engagement with the richness and particularity of the ‘real’ world is an open theme in his monologues, and a central issue in his aesthetics: as his Fra Lippo Lippi declares: “This world’s no blot for us, / Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good: / To find its meaning is my meat in drink.” (313-15). Browning’s intense commitment to the modern world of prose has long been noted by his contemporaries and critics: Oscar Wilde famously claims, “Meredith was a prose Browning. And so was Browning” (29); in the next section, we shall see how this widespread evaluation is taken up by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Underlying the various critical reactions of flippancy,⁷ anxiety, and bemusement is the recognition that Browning employs the interpenetration of traditionally opposite genres to put pressure on the divide.

While Hegel views prose as a realm of deadening habits and limits that must be overcome by the figural virtuosity of poetry, Browning renders the relationship as one of mutual enrichment, where each mode becomes the means of uncovering richer potentialities of thought and expression in the other: even as prose interrogates the figurative qualities of poetry, poetry itself is challenged and enriched by prosaic themes. Critics have placed Browning’s prosaic-poetic experiments in the context of the

⁷ Wilde can afford to be more flippant than most, for his own work advances Browning’s interrogation of the subject-object divide, as realized through the creative interpenetration of ‘poetic’ and ‘prosaic’ qualities and concepts, as we shall see in the concluding chapter.

popularity of the verse-novel genre of the mid-nineteenth century (Felluga 2007; Markovits 2017). The dominance of prose fiction in the literary market resulted in the view that what Bakhtin would later term the “novelization” of poetry – the infusion of techniques and themes usually associated with the prose novel – was required for poetry to survive as a viable (and marketable) literary genre. This idea was represented in and through a raft of “verse-novels,” such as Arthur Hugh Clough’s *Amours de Voyage* (1858), Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* (1854-63), and above all Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), all of which, as Stefanie Markovits writes, “show[ed] self-conscious kinship with the novel,” even in their conscious deviations from the genre. For Markovits, the “historically remote” *Ring*, set in the seventeenth century, does not evince this “self-conscious kinship” (3). However, it is possible to read Browning’s critical take on the relationship between the novel and poetry – and the wider conceptual divisions this generic divide manifests – in his very choice of a “historically remote” era, and in his use of specific poetic techniques to reproduce and problematize prose ‘facts.’

It is easy to see the verse-novel as a combination of opposite genres, – of poetry, with its figurative and symbolic articulations of eternal values and lyric subjectivity, and of prose, with its meticulous articulation of the details of everyday life. Indeed, this very divide has been traced to the popularity of prose fiction and the accompanying commercial marginalization of poetry, which led to the increasing “lyricization” of poetry – its association with the rarefied (and almost aggressively anti-market) modes that became identified with lyric: “a pure, ecstatic representation of immediacy, subjectivity, and brevity” (Markovits 6-7). A prime example of this lyricization is John Stuart Mill’s

famous definition of poetry as “feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude” (64). Isobel Armstrong views Mill’s definition of poetry in terms of exclusion, where poetry becomes “as the solitary work of the speaking subject over and against communality” (134). While Mill locates this communality in “eloquence,” it can also be ascribed to the more overtly dialogic, outward-looking, and commercially successful medium of prose. Remarkably, however, verse-novels consciously challenged the logic of generic classifications that placed prose and poetry in opposition to each other. Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* ascribes the semblance of eternal worth and transcendent lyricism attached to poetry to the effect of distance. As Stefanie Markovits argues, Barrett Browning’s deconstruction of the “aura” of poetry is part of her broader critique of the popularity of idealized, nostalgic historical revivals in art and literature, and her associated championing of contemporary concerns and modes. Nor is Barrett Browning’s interrogation of generic divides an idiosyncratic argument, for these two modes are only *apparently* opposed: as Dino Felluga points out, there is a long history of narrative poetry, while the origin of the novel itself can be traced to the peculiar blend of verse and prose in Menippean satires (172). In this context, the juxtaposition of generic and thematic opposites that the verse novel appears to represent can be more accurately viewed as dismantling the divide between them.

Robert Browning’s own verse novel takes a different route in dismantling the divide between the poetical past and the prosaic everyday. In deriving the plot of *The Ring and the Book* from a forgotten murder case of seventeenth-century Italy, Browning reveals the past to itself comprise banal, minute, and sordid events that constitute the world of prose. Significantly, his era of choice – the late seventeenth century – witnessed

the emergence and increasing popularity of prose narratives: not only the novel in English and French,⁸ but also the philosophical and scientific prose genres described by Hegel. Another mode of prose that also came into to prominence is the “legal fiction,” described by Jeremy Bentham as “[f]iction, tautology, technicality, circuitry, irregularity,” created by “the bigotry and artifice of Lawyers,” but nevertheless exerting real-world influence (92). Isobel Armstrong writes that it is “in the legal fiction that the concept of fiction was circulating” in the early nineteenth-century, when Browning was writing his first monologues. Bentham’s writings on the “dangerous power” of the “legal fiction,” owing to its combination of fictionality and real-world impact, made it recognized as “the most politically disreputable and least credible model [of fiction] to hand in radical circles” in which Browning moved. Browning’s choice of the Old Yellow Book – the Franceschini case file, as it were – reveals not only what was prosaic about the poetical past, but also the fictionality that goes into the creation of apparently factual prose, as evident in Bentham’s revealing term of “legal fiction.”

Browning employs his poetic reanimation of prose “legal fiction” to reveal the constructed nature of that prose. While his speaker protests too much that “in this book lay absolutely truth, / Fanciless fact, the documents indeed” (144-5), the “fanciless fact” itself, as we shall see, comprises legal documents from multiple sources – “Primary lawyer-pleadings for, against” and so on – in which truth is already subject to (mis)representation and (mis)interpretation by various interests. However, the narrator’s reanimation does not act on raw material, but on linguistic artefacts that are already

⁸ By current critical consensus, the first novel to be published in French is *La Princesse de Cleves* (1678) by Madame de Lafayette, followed ten years later by the first novel in English, *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688) by Aphra Behn. In keeping with the amorphous nature and origins of the novel form, however, this debate is still being continually revisited.

composed and formed. His circular and repetitive plot structure participates in a process that is already in action, and which it makes explicit through its vertiginous exaggerations and excess.

Browning's destabilization of the real is enacted at the level of the very entities that are usually taken to signify the representation of reality: details. Critics have noted his use of details within the broader context of his circular structure. Dino Felluga summarizes the workings of Browning's Rashomon-like narrative structure: "With each new speaker, one learns a little more about each character's motivations and the sometimes irreconcilably contradictory details of the case. In this way, Browning questions whether any objective, mimetic representation of events is ever possible" (182). I believe that the full significance of Browning's "contradictory" use of details is yet to be explored, addressing at it does the core irreconciliation at the heart of modernity: the lack of fit between matter and spirit, subject and object. As we have seen in our discussion of Hegel, Browning's use hyper-particular details to convey the multiple and contradictory realities conjured by multiple perceiving subjects, Browning presses this paradox to vertiginous extremes.

At every turn in Robert Browning criticism, we find the excess proliferation of details the core of the supposedly "grotesque" quality of his poetry, which, I argue, is best understood as a dissolution of the subject-object divide rather than a pathologization of it. From his contemporaries onward, commentators have traditionally interpreted the "grotesque" quality of his poetry in terms of a mutual pathologization of the 'subjective' and 'objective' elements of his poetry, where the stylistic unevenness and obscurity of hyper-particularized details attests to the extreme and "abnormal" psychological

conditions of his speakers. In his influential identification of Browning's work as "grotesque," Walter Bagehot views his poetry as representing "the type ... in *difficulties*" – showing "the perfect type" by depicting "the opposite deviation" (199). Bagehot's notion of the type is based on the idea of a perfect correspondence between the universal and the particular, which he identifies as the ideal of classical art and locates in the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth (see Christ 70). In her seminal study *The Finer Optic* on particularity in Victorian poetry (1975), Carol Christ builds on Bagehot's argument when she attributes Browning's "grotesque" art to the loss of the Romantic correspondence between the universal and the particular, which loss results in the pursuit of "the minute, the primitive, the bizarre particular" by obsessive or "abnormal" subjects with "an intensity and emphasis that exceeds normal consciousness" as a sign of their derangement, their obsessive contemplation by a character fixated in some morbid emotion" (12). But we have already seen in our discussion of Hazlitt and Hegel how the very idea of a correspondence between the particular and the universal, which is central to Romantic organicism, is the result of the disruption of the classical representational order. Browning's "grotesque" art moves beyond psychological pathology, when it is recognized as engaged in making explicit the tensions implicit in the organic Romantic balance of the universal and the particular – that is, exemplifying the opposite of Romantic virtuosity. By representing abnormal speakers perceiving and fixating on details seemingly unrelated to the issue at hand, Browning does not so much pathologize the "type" as much as he questions its very existence as the embodiment of an inherent correspondence between universal and particular. As we shall see in the next section, the correlation of abnormality and distinctness that is at the core of the concept of the

“grotesque” is too stable for Browning’s depiction of details in *The Ring*, where he subjects both the details and the subjectivities they are associated with to a mutual fragmentation.

Browning’s anti-virtuosity

The mutual destabilization of subjectivity and objectivity through the rendering of details begins with Browning’s Poet himself. The most prominent instance of Browning’s use of figurative language to represent novelistic detail in *The Ring and the Book* occurs in his description of the market-place in Book I, where he found the Old Yellow Book. This is the market of the “re-venders,” who sell discarded, broken-off parts of objects anew, as objects in their own right. Browning’s poet-narrator joins in this process through his highly figurative descriptions of the objects in terms that fluctuate between being parts and wholes.:

This book — precisely on that palace-step
Which, meant for lounging knaves o’ the Medici,
Now serves re-venders to display their ware —
'Mongst odds and ends of ravage, picture-frames
White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces chipped,
Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests,
(Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade)
Modern chalk drawings, studies from the nude,
Samples of stone, jet, breccia, porphyry
Polished and rough, sundry amazing busts
In baked earth (broken, Providence be praised!) [...]
Whereof a copy contents the Louvre! — these
I picked this book from. (I.50-75).

The narrator’s description of the objects on sale at once reflects and subverts the process of re-vending, or making whole again, by representing fragments as objects that fluctuate between being parts and wholes. As fragments, these objects possessed a relative stability and nobility of form. As Omar Calabrese points out, fragments are parts broken off from

a larger whole (fragment being derived from the Latin *frangere*, “to break,” 72). In Romantic aesthetics, however, it is not uncommon for fragments to be imbued with the sense of the whole. The most influential instance is Winckelmann’s perception of fragments of Classical statuary as aesthetic wholes, which, according to Rancière, signifies the beginning of the displacement of the classical order by the aesthetic regime of art (*Aisthesis* 1-20). Hegel reinforces this perception when he views the Classical fragment as comprising details that are held in suspension, in a harmonious relationship with the whole: “even the minutest detail has its purpose; everything has its own particular character... and yet it remains in continual flux, counts and lives only in the whole. The result is that the whole can be recognized in fragments” (2.726). Naomi Schor views Hegel as “lending to the humble detail some of the prestige of the noble fragment” (Schor 26). But the fragments on sale in the re-venders’ market are themselves far humbler than Classical fragments, for they are broken off from relatively ephemeral domestic artefacts rather than from Classical statuary. The speaker’s description further undermines these fragments’ status as partial wholes, by setting the details free from containment, as it were, by describing them in indeterminate terms that veer between being parts and wholes.

Through his descriptive detailing, the speaker transforms these fragments into whole new objects that yet remember their partial status. The “picture-frames” and “mirror-sconces” are the broken-off “odds and ends” (frames, sconces) of whole objects (pictures, mirrors) whose word-ghosts they continue to carry with them – at once yoked and separated with a hyphen. An additional “chipping” away of minute parts further enables their rebirth: the wornness of the gilt settles on the mirror frame like a coat of

fresh paint, creating the semblance of a new white frame beneath the old gold one. The damage itself is represented as a whole object in its own right: the “White” that opens line 54 is clearly an adjective that describes the picture-frame at the end of line 53, but the narrator’s use of enjambment points to “White” being used as a thing in its own right, to open a new line of poetry. The speaker’s verbal carving or *detailing* of the objects enlivens these fragments, transforming them into an unsettled and animate interplay between parts and wholes.

The blurring of prose and poetry itself is enacted by the speaker’s detailing: while the passage and poem itself is in blank verse, this scheme is fittingly broken up by the jagged descriptions of the broken objects. The colors that open lines 55-6, for instance (“Bronze” and “White” respectively) can be counted as stressed, so that the lines open with spondees for the reader to stumble on rather than the more accommodating iambs. In breaking up of the iambic pentameter of blank verse, the speaker builds on the ambiguity of blank verse itself. In her perceptive reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s in *Aurora Leigh*, Naomi Levine argues that EBB uses deliberately “imperfect rhymes” in blank verse to “troubl[e] the difference between rhymed and unrhymed verse, showing that difference to be only a matter of degree” (99). One can extend this argument to claim that in using details – typically the province of prose – to break up the iambic pentameter of blank verse, Robert Browning himself shows the difference between prose and poetry to be a matter of degree.

This dissolution of the difference between prose and poetry enacted through details also troubles the distinctions between individual genres. On the one hand, the details described by the speaker exacerbate the ambiguity of dramatic poetry, being an

apparent rendering of external fact that ironically reveals the highly creative perception of a lyric subject. On the other hand, this passage of dramatic monologue itself functions as a description that also contains the seeds of narrative, as we see in the case of the “Bronze angel-heads,” knobs once attached to trunks (probably Renaissance *cassoni*, or bridal trousseau chests), that have been transmogrified by damage into “angel-heads” – autonomous art objects whose aesthetic representation of semi-divine beings overcomes the fact that they depict heads without bodies. The speaker imaginatively reverses this process by turning the heads back into knobs, which become the nodes of a little vignette where they are handled by “dames” selecting their brocades from the chests. At first, this scene appears to be the verbal equivalent of a domestic genre-picture, like a Vermeer painting, which appears to “describ[e] the world seen” rather than produce “imitations of significant human actions,” as Svetlana Alpers puts it (Alpers xxv-xx). However, as Franco Moretti points out, such “unmemorable” genre scenes also “suggest a little story” (364), so that the difference between narrative and description is one of degree and length rather than kind. Through the speaker’s own handling, the description of the “angel-heads” becomes the seed of a story that is at once brought into the reader’s focus and cut off by the split circle of the parenthesis. The speaker leaves this little scene in its state of promising possibility, gesturing towards different narratives left for the reader to imagine.

Browning’s poetic descriptions transform the seemingly empirical representation of details into the seeds of multiple narrative and conceptual possibilities. This state of in-betweenness, of veering between seeming opposites – the utmost of objective details beginning to unwind into multiple unrealized narratives – generates the jagged complexity and unevenness of his style. In a letter to Richard Watson Dixon in October

1881, Gerard Manley Hopkins frames Browning's descriptive style in his analysis of the market-scene in terms of the generic divide between prose and poetry, but he too struggles to come down on either side:

I was greatly struck with the skill in which he displayed the facts from different points of view: this is masterly... I remember a good case of "the important collection of particulars" of which you speak in the description of the market place at Florence where he found the book of the trial: it is a pointless photograph of still life, such as I remember in Balzac, minute upholstery description; only that in Balzac, who besides is writing prose, all tells and is given with a reserve and simplicity of style which Browning has not got. Indeed I hold with the oldfashioned [sic] criticism that Browning is not really a poet, that he has all the gifts but the one needful and the pearls without the string; rather one should say raw nuggets and rough diamonds (Abbott 74-5).

Hopkins's final adherence to the "oldfashioned" view that Browning is a writer of prose rather than of poetry is complicated by his recognition that Browning's prosaicness discloses a *different* view of prose qualities than those explored by other prose writers. The prose that Hopkins cites – the fiction of Balzac – is simple and straightforward, and inheres above all in his uncomplicated description of "particulars" that are fulfill no narrative purpose: "a pointless photograph of still life." Hopkins's evaluation of Balzac's prose style – and of novelistic prose in general – echoes Hegel's requirements of accuracy and comprehensiveness of prose. Barthes would identify what he sees as the uncomplicated description of details in the prose of Balzac's fellow French realist, Flaubert, as signifying the "reality effect," the illusion of the real that is independent of

any narrative, characterological, or semantic significance.⁹ But Browning's representation of particulars, unlike Balzac's, does not create any comfortable illusion of reality – his style is not simple but almost aggressively complicated, full of formidably complex images and disharmonious sounds that seem to flaunt their obscurity and difficulty, and their frustration of any single meaning. While his technical skill is indisputable for Hopkins, it creates not the simple still life images of narrative prose, nor even the pleasurable aesthetic images of poetry, but a jagged amalgam of the two: “raw nuggets and rough diamonds.”

In Hopkins's poetry, the diamond, with its incredibly compacted and perfectly symmetrical crystalline structure, is a figure for the perfectibility of poetic language, through the progressive refinement and compression of several onomatopoeically-related images into one flawless crystalline image that expresses the ‘inscape’ of an object: “This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond / Is immortal diamond” (*Poems* 23-4; see Imogen Forbes-Macphail 145-6). But Browning's uncomfortable prose-poetry amalgam, which exacerbates complexity rather than reduce it, conjures the very different image of the diamond as yet unrefined into simplicity and symmetry. By “display[ing] the facts from different points of view” without reducing them into a single image or meaning, Browning's poetic prose signifies irreducible complexity and irreconcilable contradictions. This complexity comes from his refusal to choose between poetical and prose qualities, but to use them to intensify and interrogate each other. He

⁹ Later, Rancière would revise this view by identifying the proliferation of details as the symptom of the disruption of the classical representational order – but would nevertheless continue to view details in collective terms, as engendering an uncomplicated illusion of reality, rather than as figuratively and semantically complex entities requiring individual attention (“Politics” 2009).

enacts this process at the granular level of detail – the basic unit of prose, as it were, which, he renders through complicated metaphors and images that are usually the prerogative of poetry, but which he energizes to effect multiple and contradictory perspectives and narrative possibilities.

These dizzyingly complex representations of detail have a purpose that goes even beyond their formal indeterminacies and generic transformations, a purpose that recalls the origin of detail itself as an aesthetic category: the representation of subjectivity. Specifically, the use of details to interrogate the boundaries between part and whole indicates the perceptual ‘carving’ activity of a subject that is itself perpetually in process, constantly constituting itself through its relation with the external world. As a coherent self, Browning’s speaker-poet is curiously absent: we do not hear the confessions of deep feeling, the semblance of emotional depth that characterize lyric subjectivity. Instead, we have a self-presentation of subjectivity that is remarkably outward looking, and that realizes – and interrogates – itself through the ‘carving’ of the external world in indeterminate details that cast into question the boundary between self and world, part and whole.

The Poet’s destabilizing self-realization through external details comes across in his representation of the encounter with the Old Yellow Book (OYB) in the market. The OYB is represented as only one of the innumerable details that comprise the incomparable pageant of objects before him – and a detail that, on first sight, cannot compare with its “compeers” that are “tempting more” (1.76). In contrast to his evocative descriptions of the other objects, the narrator does not describe the book at all at the

moment of first seeing it. We only catch a glimpse of the “lettered back” the poet-narrator sees, without understanding what it meant to him:

Five compeers in flank
 Stood left and right of it as tempting more — [...]
 The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody,
 Saint Somebody Else, his Miracles, Death and Life —
 With this, one glance at the lettered back of which,
 And “Stall!” cried I: a lira made it mine. (1.75-83).

What is it about this book that stood out to him from the other books and objects on display, and why does he describe its appearance so sparsely? The Poet is coy about the answer. By his own account, he does not choose the Book so much as he is directed to choose it by an unknown, omnipotent divine “Hand,” always hovering above him, that chooses this moment to strike:

[...] I found this book,
 Gave a lira for it, eightpence English just,
 (Mark the predestination!) when a Hand,
 Always above my shoulder, pushed me once (I.39-42)

By creating a triangular structure of visibility and desire, where a disembodied, divine Hand pushes him to select, for no discernible reason, one book out of many, the Poet recasts his unfathomable personal decision to buy the OYB (which brings to mind Arasse’s recognition of the “excessively subjective” nature of detail, 7-8) in terms of the subjective poet’s mode of functioning, who shapes his representations in keeping with his inner awareness of the great subjectivity of God. In this context, the mode of (not) representing the detail of the OYB becomes an oblique way of representing the constitutive contradictions of his perceiving subjectivity.

The intensely subjective nature of the Poet’s selection of the OYB is conceptually similar to a theory of detail very different from the “notation” of the real with which

literary detail is generally identified (thanks to Barthes's (The Reality Effect"). This is the theory of the *punctum*, or photographic detail of intensely personal significance, also explained by Barthes in his *Camera Lucida* (1980). While the detail of literary realism is present in profusion, and creates the illusion of "the Real" precisely in its lack of any other (narrative, characterological, or semantic) function, *punctum* is a photographic detail of intensely personal significance that arises from its wider surrounding field of undifferentiated details (or *studium*), "shoot[ing] out of it like an arrow, and pierc[ing] me" (26). The seeming autonomy of the punctum reflects the ineluctably subjective significance that the viewer, Barthes, himself places there. Due to its personal nature, the punctum cannot be experienced by others. Hence Barthes excludes the punctum and the photograph in question (the face of his mother in the "Winter Garden" photograph) from his book, instead using language to communicate his *punctum*'s significance to his readers. Barthes views the shared symbolic order of language as ideally offering a mode of "universaliz[ing]" his particular subjectivity: "My particularity could never again universalize itself (unless, utopically, by writing, whose project henceforth would become the unique goal of my life)" (72). Thus, the profuse verbal details in which Barthes renders the missing photographic detail of his mother's face enables him to universalize his particular self. But Browning problematizes the very idea of a particular self when he omits the representation of the *punctum* (the OYB) in the moment of perception, in favor of detailing the surrounding scene (or *studium*) of the other items on sale. It is my contention that in his enlivening of the details that do not affect him personally, we can find the Poet's peculiarly impersonal mode of subjectivity reflected. His anti-virtuosic representation of *studium* details in terms that veer between being parts

and wholes, reflects the activity of a subject that does not comprise a solid core of inner depth, but a series of dynamic and fundamentally unreconciled negotiations between subjects and objects, parts and wholes.

The Poet's subjectivity is a persona that is perpetually in process, already engaged in realizing his subjectivity through the animation of external objects that are in turn the remnants of previous selves. We see this process in the Poet's famous extended metaphor for his creative process as the animation of dead matter:

No less, man, bounded, yearning to be free,
May so project his surplusage of soul
In search of body, so add self to self
By owning what lay ownerless before —
So find, so fill full, so appropriate forms —
That, although nothing which had never life
Shall get life from him, be, not having been,
Yet, something dead may get to live again (l.721-9).

What appears to be a relatively straightforward process (insofar as the term can be applied to Browning) of the poet's self infusing an existing dead body – that is, an existing form – is complicated by his use of “self” for both his self and the body: “so add self to self.” The speaker's use of “self” for the body might indicate that the pre-existing dead body, or older form, is the shell of another self, the creation of another, earlier poet. But in the absence of any clarification or qualification (no articles or pronouns that denote possession, for instance), one cannot rule out the possibility that it is the poet's own self that has also come to realize itself in the body, becoming imperceptibly intermingled with it, so that his “reanimation” further exacerbates this process through reiteration. The idea of a subject or spirit permeating and recognizing itself in the object is central to Hegel's dialectical interrogation of the self-other divide. The dialectical

constitution and dissolution of self is continually replicated and intensified in the Poet's energizing "reanimation" of forms and facts that are already shaped by his self.

The famous metaphor of the ring is another key self-reflexive moment that is designed to evoke but not resolve the dizzying levels of dialectical self-constitution and dissolution through the object. The Poet figures his poem, forged through the apparent infusion of his anima with the "crude fact" of the Old Yellow Book, by means of a ring, the gold of which has been rendered "malleable" and workable through fusion with an alloy. We have already seen in the previous section how the comparison between the pure gold and the "pure crude fact" of the Book is untenable, not only because of the dizzying accumulation of metaphors for the gold, but also because of the OYB's unavoidable fictionalization, comprising as it does multiple and contradictory witness testimonies and legal briefs. The Poet's "reanimation" of the "facts" of the OYB takes the form of energizing matter that is already formed and permeated by selves, much like the "dead body" discussed above itself comprises the irresolvable intermingling of the Poet's self with other, forgotten selves. Thus "reanimation" intensifies the core untenability of the metaphors of "gold" for fact and the "alloy" for the poet's imagination. The destabilizations of this creative process are enacted by Poet's extended and highly detailed metaphor of forging the ring-figure:

That trick is, the artificer melts up wax
With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold
With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,
Effects a manageable mass, then works.
But his work ended, once the thing a ring,
Oh, there's repristination! Just a spirt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume;
While, self- sufficient now, the shape remains,
The rondure brave, the liliated loveliness,

Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore:
 Prime nature with an added artistry —
 No carat lost, and you have gained a ring (I.18-30).

The Poet outlines a complicated creative process where his self figures doubly, as both subject and as object: as an “alloy” it infuses the gold to effect the “manageable mass” to be worked, even as it “work[s]” on the ring as the craftsman. This duality of the Poet, as both subject, and object, which recalls the dialectic we have seen above, complicates the seeming disappearance during the acid “repristination.” Critics have long been skeptical of the authenticity of this “repristination,” which originally denotes a reversion to a pristine state, but is here immediately rendered ironic due to its highly figurative nature, the end result of which is an artefact (the formed ring) rather than a return to the original gold. Walter DeVane dismisses the “repristination” altogether, arguing that the “fancy or imagination of the poet, which is the jeweler’s ‘alloy’ in shaping the ring, does not, happily, fly off in fume in the poem, but remains as the most essential part of the work” (330). Diane Patricia Rigg identifies Browning’s representation of “repristination” as “parodic,” viewing it as emblematic of the paradoxical treatment of the truth that is at the heart of Browning’s Romantic irony: he is as enthusiastically committed to an act of “repristination” as he is skeptically aware (20). I propose that a richer understanding of Browning’s skeptical yet enthusiastic “repristination” is possible if we recall the originals to be repristinated – the so-called “gold,” the “pure crude fact” of the Old Yellow Book, or the body to be reanimated – all of these are themselves representations, wherein any “objective” facts or truths were already intermingled with forming subjects, so that the infusion of the Poet’s “alloy”-self heightens the mutually constitutive dialectic between subject and seemingly objective fact.

The enduring effect of the Poet's ironic "repristination," the lingering presence of his subjective imagination, can be found in the second part of the process outlined above: the form itself, the overall roundness or "rondure brave" of the ring as well as its "liliated loveliness." The Poet articulates this shape in dual terms, as the overall form of the ring as well as its smaller ornamental details. The poet's subjectivity, comprising self-objectifying negotiations with the outside world, is fittingly transmuted into a dialectical form that inheres in the relationship between the overall shape and its particular details. One may read this relationship reflected in the interplay between the rounded structure of *The Ring and the Book* itself (which begins and ends with the Poet's monologues, the titles of which are mirror images of each other) and the monologues of individual characters themselves, which function as details that echo, contradict and ironicize each other, and together animate – or threaten – the round of *The Ring*.

From its commencement, the Poet does not represent his creative process directly, but figures it in indirect terms, through his description of external objects. The night after he procures the OYB, he describes himself undertaking the first step of "fusing" his soul with his subject matter. After reading the OYB, the Poet sets it aside, and steps out on his terrace for a contrasting experience of openness to refresh his mind after to his reading of the OYB, and "to free myself and find the world" (I.478). What follows, however, is another strangely indirect representation of the inner fusions of this poetic process, manifested as an extended description of the city below:

I fused my live soul and that inert stuff,
Before attempting smithcraft, on the night
After the day when — truth thus grasped and gained —
The book was shut and done with and laid by [...]
It always came and went with June. Beneath
I' the street, quick shown by openings of the sky

When flame fell silently from cloud to cloud,
 Richer than that gold snow Jove rained on Rhodes,
 The townsmen walked by twos and threes, and talked,
 Drinking the blackness in default of air —
 A busy human sense beneath my feet (I.469-493).

The Poet represents his inner fusing and enlivening of the contents of the OYB with his self through the opposite process of external description. One might read a faint correspondence between this “human sense” and the inchoate formation of the individual speakers in the Poet’s mind, but at any rate this description is what one might call “negative,” as Hegel writes when he describes the lack of correspondence between inward spirituality or subjectivity and the appearance of external, objective matter in Romantic art (1.80). Similarly, in the above description, there is no inherent correlation between inner and outer perceptual processes, but the presence of description itself signifies the inner activity of the Poet’s mind. The Poet’s description grows into correspondence, however, as his gaze travels further outward, taking in the “circle” from Arezzo (Franceschini’s town) to Rome, the scene of his trial and execution. The description of this “round” is interspersed with the Poet’s mentions of his inner creative process of “fusion”:

Over the roof o’ the lighted church I looked
 A bowshot to the street’s end, north away
 Out of the Roman gate to the Roman road
 By the river, till I felt the Apennine.
 And there would lie Arezzo, the man’s town,
 The woman’s trap and cage and torture- place,
 Also the stage where the priest played his part,
 A spectacle for angels — ay, indeed,
 There lay Arezzo! Farther then I fared,
 Feeling my way on through the hot and dense,
 Romeward, until I found the wayside inn
 By Castelnuovo’s few mean hut-like homes [...]
 Step by step, missing none and marking all,
 The life in me abolished the death of things,

Deep calling unto deep: as then and there
 Acted itself over again once more
 The tragic piece [...] (I.497-523).

The Poet's inner intermingling of his with the object (the OYB) is here figured through the outward self-realization in the external details he perceives. At the end of this mysterious, parallel process, he has his characters in his mind: the Comparini couple ("Pompilia's parents, as they thought themselves,/ Two poor ignoble hearts who did their best," I.527-8), Pompilia herself ("one soul white enough for three," I.534), and her husband "Guido the main monster" and his "goblin" brothers. As his descriptions make clear, these individuals already represent the "truth" imperceptibly intermingled with his own fictionalizing imagination: "my fancy with those facts...Such substance of me interfused [with] the gold" (I.681-2). The precise nature of the intermingling remains undiscernible, leading the Poet to ask if his "fiction" might also form part of the "fact" it enlivens:

What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
 This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
 That quickened, made the inertness malleolable
 O' the gold was not mine — what's your name for this?
 Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
 Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?
 The somehow may be thishow (I.700-6).

The question remains unanswered, for it is unanswerable. The poet's fictionalizing self is so intensely fused in the enlivening of the fact as to be inseparable. Exacerbating this inseparability is the figure of restoration: "I disappeared; the book grew all in all; / The lawyers' pleadings swelled back to their size" (I.688). The restoration of the lawyers' pleading to original size is ironic because it is brought about by the fictionalizing and augmenting activity of the Poet's subjectivity, which can be seen as disappearing *into* the

ring rather than from it. The infusion of the Poet's subjectivity makes explicit, and exacerbates, the fictional nature of the "pleadings," so that the representation of supposed fact becomes the very opposite: the site of imagination and subjective (self-)invention.

This ironic restoration of fact by fiction is exacerbated by the Poet's creation of the more overtly fictional speakers – Half-Rome, the Other Half-Rome, the Tertium Quid – that build on the Poet's fictionalization of the key characters. Each speaker's dwelling on supposedly factual details of testimony, often in ironically figurative language that serves to obscure meaning instead of clarifying it, becomes the site of that speaker's self-constitution and self-interrogation. Further, the discrepancies in the different speakers' figuration of details refreshes those details by illuminating the latest possibilities of thought; in this sense, the speakers can be seen as extended metaphors for each other.

The Carvers and the Carved: Details and Selves

Browning employs details to give the effect of subjectivities that are never more intensely subjective and creative than when they are perceptually carving and analyzing seemingly objective details. In their sly figuring of details the intermingling of fact and fiction is exacerbated to the utmost.

The carving of details is hideously literalized by Guido Franceschini, and his target of choice is the body. Before describing his carving of the bodies of his wife and her family, he speculates about having cut off one joint of his wife's *ring* finger as a preventative measure:

If I — instead of threatening, talking big, [...]
 Had, with the vulgarest household implement,
 Calmly and quietly cut off, clean thro' bone,
 But one joint of one finger of my wife,
 Saying "For listening to the serenade,
 "Here's your ring-finger shorter a full third: [...]"

So, by this time, my true and obedient wife
 Might have been telling beads with a gloved hand;
 Awkward a little at pricking hearts and darts
 On sampler possibly, but well otherwise:
 Not where Rome shudders now to see her lie (V.947-78).

Franceschini enacts on the body of his wife a grotesque version of the adage about a stitch in time saving nine: if he had severed a joint of his wife's ring finger, he would have deterred her from committing the transgression that compelled him to carve her up later. The body, and specifically the female body, becomes an unruly field to be disciplined and possessed. In her comprehensive study *Reading in Detail*, Naomi Schor argues that in Western aesthetics, the detail is "gendered, and doubly gendered as feminine," through its association with fields of representation that are traditionally 'othered' as female: the physical body (and nature in general), the ornamental, and the everyday (xii). Schor reads the banishment of details from the representational order in eighteenth-century neoclassical aesthetics, by theorists such as Reynolds, as asserting in representational terms "the sexual hierarchies of the phallocentric cultural order" (xii). One can read the Count's fixation on the little joint of his wife's ring finger as the desire to assert such a control. Yet ironically this desire is expressed in the wake of its frustration – the Count, to his regret, failed to assert such a control, leading to the extravagant and crude 'carving' later. His fantasy of mastery and control, expressed in the subjunctive mood, of severing his wife's finger-joint, ironically becomes an expression of loss of control aimed at justifying his later brutality, and eliciting the sympathy of his interlocutors who sit in judgment upon him.

The Count expresses a very different kind of loss of control in his ‘carving’ of the Comparinis, so excessive in its brutality. In contrast with his extended fantasy of lopping off his wife’s finger-joint, the Comparinis’ murder is narrated elliptically:

I had stumbled, first thing, on the serpent’s [Violante’s] head
Coiled with a leer at foot of it.

There was the end!
Then was I rapt away by the impulse, one
Immeasurable everlasting wave of a need
To abolish that detested life. ’Twas done:
You know the rest and how the folds o’ the thing,
Twisting for help, involved the other two
More or less serpent-like: how I was mad,
Blind, stamped on all, the earth-worms with the asp,
And ended so (V.1659-69).

The break of stanza enacts a break in action as recalled by the Count. On being met by Violante at the door – whom he considers to be chief wrongdoer for having misled him into marrying the girl she had falsely passed off as her daughter – he claims to enter a dissociative state in which he commits the murders. Thus, his most significant action, the crime of which he stands accused, is represented in passive terms by its agent. This state of dissociation can be compared with that of another famous murderer in nineteenth-century literature – that of the old woman by Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov. Jacques Rancière has identified in Dostoyevsky’s representation of this murder an example of the disruption of the classical representational order by the democratic order of modern aesthetics, for it is depicted not as a sequence of actions, but as being committed in a “a hallucination provoked by an access of fever” (Rancière 2009). While the classical order, Rancière argues, comprises an unbroken causal narrative of significant actions committed by aristocratic characters, the “plot of the democratic times separates action from itself,” to the point that the causal sequence of actions is suspended through the inaction of non-

aristocratic characters or the proliferation of descriptive details not clearly related to the plot. The Count's dissociation and use of details, however, complicates the idea of a division at the heart of action. Unlike the excess description of the novel, the Count's descriptions are delivered in a monologue, deliberately crafted by him to justify his actions and appeal to his interlocutors. Details reveal his own self-serving subjective and creative activity; in the above instance, his elliptical exclusion of detail highlights the excess brutality of the murders.

The Count's excessive and excessively crude attempt at asserting control through the excision of details is considerably inept than that of the other aristocratic uxoricide in Browning's poetry, the Duke of Ferrara in "My Last Duchess." In his susceptibility to details, the Duke of Ferrara represents an earlier, more classical stage (that is nevertheless beginning to transition into modernity) than the hapless Count Guido. Browning's Duke lingers on the virtuosic representation of the "spot of joy" on the portrait of his last Duchess by the artist "Fra Pandolf" which can be read as a detail, a part that stands out from the whole, without any sufficient narrative justification or cause – certainly not Fra Pandolf's hypothetical praise that "Her mantle laps / Over my lady's wrist too much (ll. 16-17), which the Duke imagines the Duchess delighting in indiscriminately. While the "spot" can be read as exemplifying the artist's virtuosity (in the Hegelian sense, where the skillful representation of details in the non-classical arts of portraiture and genre painting brings out the artist's subjectivity), the Duke by his own admission is not pondering the virtuosity as much as the lack of sufficient cause for the "spot," which represents a threat to his very sense of being. Herbert Tucker views the Duke as "heir of a heavily traditional sense of himself, which prescribes fixed relations between form and

meaning,” so that “any obstacle to interpretation” comes across as “a personal threat” (*Disclosure* 178). The Duke, in other words, is representative of what Rancière terms the classical representational order, based on the strict subordination of parts to the whole, and on a clear, causal logic of actions committed by aristocratic characters (Rancière 2009). The “spot,” with its causeless virtuosity, represents the democratic disruption of the classical order by details, which signify the suspension of narrative causality and meaning. The Duchess, with her (according to the Duke) indiscriminate joy in trifling events, her total lack of an aristocratic sense of causality and proportion, becomes representative of the democracy of details, and is thus a threat to be obliterated. Yet the continuing fascination of the “spot” signals his own susceptibility to details that he cannot control or explain: “spot of joy” is after all his own virtuosic verbal metaphor for the visually virtuosic “spot” that catches his eye. One can view the Duke’s slight susceptibility to details broadly anticipating the disruption and reconfiguration of the classical order to let in previously excluded, asymmetrical and insignificant forms, such as details. In Count Franceschini’s case, the disruption has gone further: his relatively lower status, and the further decay of his house in an increasingly mercantile age, mean that he is irrevocably embedded in the prose of the world, and at the risk from the details he seeks to control.

Ironically for someone seeking to master details, he is undone by a single detail he had imperiously overlooked, secure in his own power and status. This is the piece of paper that was supposed to furnish him with horses for his getaway; having forgotten to procure this, he vainly attempts to bribe the post-master, and his baffled rage at being refused is palpable:

And there on the instant. And day o' the week,
 A ducat slid discreetly into palm
 O' the mute post-master, while you whisper him —
 How you the Count and certain four your knaves,
 Have just been mauling who was malapert,
 Suspect the kindred may prove troublesome,
 Therefore, want horses in a hurry — that
 And nothing more secures you any day
 The pick o' the stable! Yet I try the trick,
 Double the bribe, call myself Duke for Count,
 And say the dead man only was a Jew,
 And for my pains find I am dealing just
 With the one scrupulous fellow in all Rome —
 Just this immaculate official stares [...]

Stands on the strictness of the rule o' the road!
 "Where's the Permission?" Where's the wretched rag
 With the due seal and sign of Rome's Police,
 To be had for asking, half-an-hour ago?
 "Gone? Get another, or no horses hence!" (V.1625-46).

The Count's immense rage at being refused goes beyond his desperation to make a getaway: he is genuinely baffled at the inexorability of the post-master, "the one scrupulous fellow in all Rome," who will not be bribed with gold, and who fears neither the Count's title nor his lackeys. In his immunity to the Count's bribery and threats, we may understand the "immaculate official" to represent the modern world of prose (to borrow Hegel's term) that replaces the older, aristocratic order that the Count represents, with a maze of impersonal and inexorable systems that only function through the correct bureaucratic solutions. It is the Count's failure to understand this modern world – first by his forgetting of the paper, and then by his attempted corruption of the post-master – that results in his apprehension, and renders inevitable the judgment upon his unlawful, old-fashioned revenge killing. His being overwhelmed by the details of the world of prose is made literal by his execution, where he himself will be 'carved' by the "man-mutilating

machine” (XI.207) – the mechanical and ruthless efficient means of carving details in the modern world of prose.

Yet the carving of prose details is anything but mechanical and efficient, as revealed in the monologues of the two lawyers. In selecting and analyzing details for Guido’s prosecution and defense respectively, Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis (the Procurator, or in this case Guido’s defense) and Juris Doctor Bottinius (the Fisc or prosecutor) bring to bear their finest talents for obscurity, sophistry, and unconscious irony. G.K. Chesterton views the lawyers’ monologues as the representative of what he identifies as Browning’s guiding idea of *The Ring*: the dismantling of a central truth in favor of a centrifugal proliferation of multiple perspectives, where “some mere trifle puts the matter in a new light, and the detail that seemed meaningless springs up as almost the central pillar of the structure” (160). As we shall see, however, each lawyer exemplifies a very different relation to detail.

Of the two lawyers, Archangelis is thoroughly identified with details and with the realm of the everyday. Even before he begins preparing his defense plea, he is immersed in the warm world of everyday domesticity from which he turns only reluctantly to his task, and which frequently interrupts his thoughts and mingles with the sordid details of the crime:

Let law come dimple Cinoncino’s cheek,
And Latin duple Cinarello’s chin
The while we spread him fine and toss him flat
This pulp that makes the pancake, trim our mass
Of matter into Argument the First,
Prime Pleading in defence of our accused (VIII.64-9).

As an overfed and overly content family man, Archangelis resembles the well-fed jolly burghers of Dutch genre pictures that enliven the modern world with its glowing details

of domestic life. Yet this burgher is transposed into an Italian setting, and made to dabble with details of crime. Archangelis proves as enamored of details of the crime as he is of the details of domestic comforts: by his own admission he is widely recognized as being inordinately attentive to details at the cost of missing the big picture:

“You play ship-carpenter, not pilot so —
 “Stop rat-holes, while a sea sweeps through the breach —
 “Hammer and fortify at puny points! [...]
 “No good of your stopped leaks and littleness! (VIII.250-5).

This is a dizzying feat of layered utterance, for Archangelis – who is himself given voice by Browning’s unnamed narrator – ventriloquizes his own critics. Archangelis simultaneously voices his critics’ concerns with his attention to details, and dismisses them, for what appears trivial to others is in truth the mainstay of his defense: “Yet what do I name ‘little and a leak?’ / The main defence o’ the murder’s used to death” (VIII.256-7). To Archangelis, it is by working at “the new, the unforeseen, / The nice bye-stroke, the fine and improvised” that he can arrive at the point juste, as it were, that can “titillate the brain o’ the Bench” (VIII.260). The conventional subordination of part to whole in the classical representational order is suspended by Archangelis’s belief that it is the seeming trifles that are most important in his case, and can capture the imagination and sympathy of the Bench.

The fascination and desire for control that detail rouse converge in the specific element on which Archangelis hinges his defense: the dagger used by Franceschini in his attack on the Comparinis and his wife. This “poignard” is at once a detail in the wider scene of the crime, and an element that produces details, being the instrument through which the Comparinis were ‘carved’:

Such are the poignard with the double prong,

Horn-like, when tines make bold the antlered buck,
 And all of brittle glass — for man to stab
 And break off short and so let fragment stick
 Fast in the flesh to baffle surgery:
 And such the Genoese blade with hooks at edge
 That did us service at the Villa here (VIII.1163-1169).

The knife not only carves the bodies of its victims, but itself functions as a body that sheds its extremities – the hooks on its edge – in the body, each of which becomes a miniature body in its own right, lodging in the flesh and “baffl[ing] surgery” (VIII.987).

The elaborateness of the weapon gives form to its excess of cruelty that stands out to other monologists, particularly the Pope: ““Murder with jagged knife! Cut but tear too! / Foiled oft, starved long, glut malice for amends!”” (X.742-3). The excess cruelty, which strikes onlookers as being out of proportion even for the terrible logic of revenge, suspends that logic much like details suspend the narrative causality of the classical representational order. The excess cruelty signified by the elaborate dagger has the ironic effect of suspending the very control of which they are supposed to be the instrument.

This loss of control is in keeping with the core ambiguity of detail itself as an aesthetic category, which stems from its dual identity as a part that function as a whole in its own right and that simultaneously disrupts the larger whole it comprises. The disruption of narrative logic and control signified by the dagger is realized in the evidentiary role that Archangelis assigns it in his legal narrative. Usually this level of attention to detail suggests the consummate control of the master detective – such as Sherlock Holmes – who interprets “tiny details” as “clues” to a “deeper reality, inaccessible by other methods” (Ginzburg 11).¹⁰ However, Holmes’s consummate

¹⁰ Significantly for the setting of this poem, Carlo Ginzburg traces the inductive method of detection to seventeenth-century Italian medical practices, where the physician created his diagnosis from the observation of particular physical symptoms; this can be seen as an instance the increasing reliance of

mastery and control over details is itself the result of the supremely controlled lab-setting of the detective story, where reality is rendered finite and decipherable, and where clues has finite and convenient interpretations that lead to a single, easily expendable cause (the criminal). In Browning's poem, which presents a reality that exceeds and eludes the interpretations imposed upon it, the interpretation of clues is not so straightforward. Having indulged himself in imagining the dagger, Archangelis's creates an inductive narrative where the dagger's importance is curiously dismissed:

Killed, dost see? Then, if killed, what matter how? —
 By stick or stone, by sword or dagger, tool
 Long or tool short, round or triangular —
 Poor folks, they find small comfort in a choice! (VIII.1175-8).

Archangelis seeks to reduce the fascinating deadly dagger is reduced to a sophistic and circular argument. Its elaborateness and excess cruelty does not signify in the long run, for Guido's revenge itself is "lawful": "How often must I round thee in the ears — / All means are lawful to a lawful end?" In fact, its very superfluity guarantees satisfaction to the avenger: having lacked the courage to attack Pompilia and Caponsacci at the inn where he supposedly caught them red-handed, Guido now overloads himself with "handsome superfluity of arms, / Since better say 'too much' than 'not enough'" (1197-8).

If Archangelis's excessive attention to detail highlights the ridiculousness of his arguments and his attempts at control, obsessive focus of his opposite number on the larger picture is also ironized. At first Bottinius, the prosecutor, appears to embody the

details that characterized the modern world of prose from the seventeenth century onwards, and featured in medicinal, philosophical, as well as legal texts. For Ginzburg, the chief inheritor of this tradition in the nineteenth century is Sigmund Freud with his psychoanalytic method; in the field of nineteenth-century literature, Freud's equivalent is Sherlock Holmes, with his masterful interpretations of clues.

masculine neoclassical order: his abhorrence of women goes hand and hand with his general scorn for details in art. He abjures the artist who, while painting the Nativity, “[l]imneth exact each wrinkle of the brow, / Loseth no involution, cheek or chap” (IX.46-7), instead priding himself on his focus on “the main central truth... And soul o’ the picture” (IX.100-1). Bottinius’s focus on reducing religious pictures to their essences positions him as more spiritualized and ideal in his approach than the artist of religious images. But his adherence to essential truths is complicated by his disgustingly visceral metaphor for the truth he extracts from fact:

No gobbets but smooth comfortable chime
 Secreted from each snapped-up crudity —
 Less distinct, part by part, but in the whole
 Truer to the subject — the main central truth
 And soul o’ the picture, would my Judges spy —
 Not those mere fragmentary studied facts
 Which answer to the outward frame and flesh —
 Not this nose, not that eyebrow, the other fact
 Of man’s staff, woman’s stole or infant’s clout,
 But lo, a spirit-birth conceived of flesh,
 Truth rare and real, not transcripts, fact and false (IX.97-107).

The “chime” he professes to extract from external facts echoes and subverts the Poet’s visceral image of “pure crude fact / Secreted from man’s life when hearts beat hard / And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since” (I.36-7). While the Poet describes the contents of the Old Yellow Book as “fact,” Bottinius reveals those facts (or at least his own testimony) to comprise a discomfiting mixture, the contents of which have been unpleasantly and inseparably intermingled through the process of digestion.

The discomfiting “chime” is revealed to be a cynical amalgam of fact and fiction, as he ironizes the woman in the act of ostensibly defending her. As the self-professed painter of ideal truth, he paints a legal portrait of Pompilia as a “faultless nature in a

flawless form” (IX.195) – a description that is in accord with Pompilia’s frequent characterization as a Madonna by other speakers (particularly the Poet and the Pope). Yet Bottinius’s portrait is undermined by his cynicism about Pompilia’s innocence, and specifically about her claim that she, being illiterate, could not write love-letters to her supposed paramour Caponsacci: “‘To read or write I never learned at all!’ / O splendidly mendacious!” (IX.83-4). Instead, his defense consists of justifying Pompilia’s apparent lie in favor of a greater truth: her supposed courtship of Caponsacci was justified by the “licit end” of saving her own life: “Enough was the escape from death, I hope, / To legalise the means illicit else / Of feigned love, false allurements, fancied facts” (IX.524-6). For all the apparent difference between Archangelis and Bottinius, between the detail-oriented approach of the former and the smugly spiritualized approach of the latter, vaunted difference from Archangelis, for all his focus on ideal truth rather than details, his defense is essentially the same: the end justifying the means.

The cynical similitude of the lawyers’ pleadings would certainly have contributed to the weariness of the Pope, the only reader (other than the Poet himself) who would have access to all the papers. In “these dismalest of documents” (X.213) briefs submitted to him for his judgment he sees the “figure of fact / Beside fact’s self” (X.215-6)) intermingled past the point of recovery. The fault, he decides, is in man’s language itself, the fallen product of his fallen nature, by which man is predestined to lie in the simplest acts of speech:

[...] Why, can [man] tell you what a rose is like,
 Or how the birds fly, and not slip to false
 Though truth serve better? Man must tell his mate
 Of you, me and himself, knowing he lies,
 Knowing his fellow knows the same — will think
 “He lies, it is the method of a man!”

And yet will speak for answer "It is truth"
 To him who shall rejoin "Again a lie!"
 Therefore this filthy rags of speech, this coil
 Of statement, comment, query and response,
 Tatters all too contaminate for use,
 Have no renewing: He, the Truth, is, too,
 The Word. We men, in our degree, may know
 There, simply, instantaneously, as here
 After long time and amid many lies,
 Whatever we dare think we know indeed
 — That I am I, as He is He — what else?
 But be man's method for man's life at least! (X.364-381).

The Pope opposes man's "filthy rags of speech" to the "Word" of God that is absolute "Truth." The former he likens to "filthy rags of speech" that are too "contaminate" to even be "renew[ed]"; this is a far dimmer view of human speech than that taken by the Poet, who views past human voices as bodies fit for resuscitation. The Pope, however, discounts all possibility of resuscitation by sundering the "rags" from the single and pristine "Word" that is God's nature. At the same time, however, out of this very sundering, he derives his rationale for making a judgment based on his fallible comprehension of inherently flawed documents. While God's whole "Truth" is perpetually out of reach, stray points strike the mind of man, like pinpricks of stars constellating in a "convex glass" (X.1310). It is this stray ray of the wholeness of God, reduced by "the little mind of man" to "littleness that suits [man's] faculty" (X.1320-1), that the Pope considers the basis for making a judgment. The Pope's affirmation of man's "littleness" echoes the "leaks and littleness" of which the detail-loving Archangelis stands accused. However, in the case of the Pope – God's representative on earth – this flawed "little" manifestation of God's divine nature becomes the basis of infallibility. The result is a curious belief in fallibility and the necessity of making a judgment, born of

the very awareness of fallibility and reversibility of that judgment, as we see in the Pope's hypothetical address to Guido's spirit:

If some acuter wit, fresh probing, sound
 This multifarious mass of words and deeds
 Deeper, and reach through guilt to innocence,
 I shall face Guido's ghost nor blench a jot.
 "God who set me to judge thee, meted out
 "So much of judging faculty, no more:
 "Ask Him if I was slack in use thereof!" (X.260-6).

The two sundered registers of meaning – human littleness and divine wholeness – converge in the Pope's treatment of detail. Significantly, his detail of choice is the paper for post-horses that Guido overlooked; the Pope shrewdly and correctly guesses that Guido "curses the omission... / More than the murder" (X.853-4). We have seen how the forgotten paper represents the details of the prose of the world, that Guido overlooked in his aristocratic hauteur, and which played a large role in his undoing. The Pope, while aware of the paper's this-worldly, secular, bureaucratic importance, prefers to see its omission as providential:

Guido must needs trip on a stumbling-block
 Too vulgar, too absurdly plain i' the path! [...]
 The banal scrap, clerk's scribble,
 Or foul one, if a ducat sweeten word —
 And straight authority will back demand,
 Give you the pick o' the post- house! — in such wise,
 The resident at Rome for thirty years,
 Guido, instructs a stranger! And himself
 Forgets just this poor paper scrap, wherewith
 Armed, every door he knocks at opens wide
 To save him: horsed and manned, with such advance
 O' the hunt behind, why 'twere the easy task [...]
 To reach the Tuscan Frontier, laugh at home (X.811-31).

The Pope's interpretation of the "poor scrap" as a providential stroke of luck reverses its this-worldly significance. Guido views the omission of the paper, understandably enough,

as a wretched piece of bad luck: it prevented him from making it to safety in time after the murder. But the Pope views the omission as the “mercy-stroke that stops [Guido’s] fate... On the edge o’ the precipice!” (X.855-7). Had Guido made it home safely, he would have been immediately murdered by his accomplices for withholding payment. His ignominious death would have been followed by certain damnation to “the flint and fire beneath,” for he would have been murdered without chance at confession and repentance, much as he himself had murdered the Comparinis that very night. So while the omission of the paper may have ensured his apprehension and condemnation by the authorities, it also ensured a few more days of life, a less ignominious death at the hands of justice rather than of fellow criminals, and a chance at confession and repentance. In viewing the forgotten paper as a stroke of providence, the Pope takes on the role of a kind of divine detective, reading the paper as a clue or key that provides access to a different level of reality, inaccessible by other means. In the Pope’s case, this reality is the divine “Truth” of God in which nothing is contradictory or aberrant, where even the most apparent insignificance or aberrant detail is imbued by God with divine significance. The Pope, as the imperfect index of God on earth, realizes this significance in the act of reading it. in the process, he becomes both reader and artist, the earthly manifestation of the ultimate artist that is God.

The Pope’s reading of the paper’s divine significance points to the complex interplay of the spiritual and the secular in the detail as an aesthetic category. This interplay may be compared to the dialectical relation that Hegel outlines between modern/“Romantic” art, with its representations of reality, and “ideal”/Classical art. Hegel traces the evolution of painting from its ideal origins (“*religious* subjects, still

typically treated”) to its modern focus on the “the reality of life,” painted in a highly detailed manner that enhances that appearance of reality. The virtuosic representation of details becomes both the measure of the distance art has traveled from ideal norms of beauty, and a means of approximating that ideal beauty in modern terms: “the everyday experiences of human life, or historically important national events, whether past or present, portraits and the like, all down to the tiniest and most insignificant detail [*Unbedeutendsten*], and it does this with the same love that had been lavished on the ideal content of religion” (2.870; see Schor 35). By painting worldly details with the same love and care that was previously lavished on religious subjects, the artist achieves with his “Romantic,” subjective virtuosity, the same *appearance* of reconciliation between form and content that was in fact achieved by ideal art. Naomi Schor views Hegel’s concept of virtuosity as a “*transference* onto profane subjects of the love initially lavished exclusively on sacred subjects” that nevertheless leaves its impress on the secular detail, which will “forever bear the stamp of its spiritual origins” (35). Schor reads Hegel’s virtuosity as a “*sublimation*” of detail, of reintegrating the loose, disruptive detail in an interpretive and formal framework that imbues it with significance.

I suggest that the Pope’s providential reading of detail is one such instance of attempted “sublimation,” through which the Pope seeks to convert the aberrant detail into an instrument of ultimate mastery and control: the assurance of God’s divine plan at work. Yet this attempt at assurance is undermined by the Pope’s own awareness of his fallible nature, his limited apprehension of God’s “Truth.” The self-defense the Pope imagines himself offering Guido’s ghost, should he be later found innocent – I shall face Guido’s ghost nor blench a jot. / “God who set me to judge thee, meted out / “So much of

judging faculty, no more: / “Ask Him if I was slack in use thereof!” – is undermined by his discomfited awareness that his judgment is indeed fallible and liable to be reversed. The Pope’s hypothetical declaration would not undo his wrongful judgment, would not bring the condemned Guido to life. Hence his insistence on reading divine significance in a forgotten “clerk’s scribble,” which is his attempt to make the detail signify and cohere in an assuring vision of divine order, but which ironically highlights the absence of that order. The irony of the Pope’s reading of the paper is in keeping with Browning’s anti-virtuosity, where the figurative representation of fact, far from creating the appearance of truth, of a perfect fit between meaning and image, only exacerbates the lack of fit. In the lack of fit between form and content, meaning and image, Browning finds the purpose of poetry.

Art’s Oblique Truths

Browning’s exacerbation of the lack of fit between meaning and image casts in a new light his take on the telling of oblique truths that in his view constitutes the purpose of art. Browning famously declares art as telling the truth about “human speech”:

This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation words and wind.
Why take the artistic why to prove so much?
Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least (XII.834-40).

Art’s purpose ironically lies in its speaking “the truth of human falsity” (to borrow Renée Fox’s term): the fact that human speech, including the “testimony” resuscitated by the Poet, is “naught.” Fox argues that in characterizing art as tasking human falsity for its truth, Browning highlights “the fissure between the aims of his art and the objective

rendering of the human voice” (478). But as we have seen, the “objective rendering of the human voice” is itself suspect, for the falsity of the testimonies resuscitated by the Poet reveals and exacerbates the falsity of the conflicting legal testimonies themselves, so that the representation of seemingly objective facts itself becomes the site for poetic creativity and invention. In this scenario, creativity inheres in the generation of images and meanings that do not belong together. The gap between image and meaning comprises the “oblique” quality of the truth of art:

[...] Art may tell a truth
 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
 Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.
 So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
 Beyond mere imagery on the wall —
 So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
 Deeper than ever the Andante dived —
 So write a book shall mean, beyond the facts,
 Suffice the eye and save the soul beside (XII.855-63).

The truth of human falsity spoken by art is fittingly not straightforward, not uttered through the “mediate word” that creates a perfect link between concept and image, form and content. Instead, art’s truth proceeds along the jagged fissures between meanings and images juxtaposed in ways only highlight their inherent lack of fit. This very lack of fit makes the gap a space for the generation of subjectivities, which are brought into being through the attempt to find a fit between image and meaning, while remaining aware that any such fit is provisional and endlessly changeable.

Giving form to such self-aware and self-interrogative subjectivities are the details of *The Ring*, which signify precisely in their lack of significance, their resistance to being integrated in a framework that gives them meaning. The self as detail is realized in a singular element that stands out from the narrative of *The Ring* in only appearing once

throughout the poem, in terms that highlight its lack of significance in the eyes of the speaker. In his narrative, the officious, aristocratic, and anonymous *Tertium Quid* dilates, almost in a throwaway fashion, on the unwitting and obscurest casualty of the crime:

The only one i' the world that suffered aught
By the whole night's toil and trouble, flight and chase,
Was just the officer who took them, Head
O' the Public Force — Patrizj, zealous soul,
Who, having duty to sustain the flesh,
Got heated, caught a fever and so died:
A warning to the over-vigilant,
— Virtue in a chafe should change her linen quick,
Lest pleurisy get start of providence (IV.1405-13).

The Head of the Police Force, Patrizj, is at once a particular (*particolare*) in the tableau disdainfully depicted by the *Tertium Quid*, and a detail (*dettaglio*) that catches his attention and momentarily takes over the narrative. He also effects a disturbance in the hierarchies of representation itself: on the one hand he is an element of the prose of the world, a cog in the wheel of law enforcement; on the other hand, his “zealous” pursuit of duty results in a death that combines tragedy – the domain of classical or ideal literary art – with an element of comedy, particularly as narrated by the *Tertium Quid*.¹¹ As the *Tertium* stresses, Patrizj's fatal haste was wholly unnecessary, for the criminals had fallen sound asleep; he turns Patrizj's death into a light moral lesson, the levity of which contrasts with the Pope's providential reading of details. And yet the *Tertium Quid*'s irony only heightens the inexhaustible interpretive possibilities of the detail that is Patrizj: who was he, other than the police captain? What life did he lead, what family did he have, and what thoughts underlay the strict devotion to duty that led him to his death? And why did his story exercise such fascination for the *Tertium Quid*, and the *Tertium*

¹¹ The incident of Patrizj – or Patrizi – is mentioned in Browning's secondary source, the pamphlet “The Death of the Wife-Murderer Guido Franceschini, by Beheading” (see Hodell 212).

Quid alone out of all the speakers – for, being an aristocrat like Browning’s Duke, he might be aligned with the classical representative order where details are excluded from representation? Browning’s superbly wordy narrative is silent on these questions it raises. As a detail, Patrizj is placed out of the reach of the reader, who can only make multiple provisional attempts to read his story. As a self, Patrizj represents the simultaneous constitution and eliding of subjectivity, where subjectivity inheres in the incision of details that resist being interpreted, and resist being integrated within a larger whole that confers significance.

One of Browning’s greatest readers was considerably less appreciative of the invigorating obscurity of Browning’s representations. In a letter to Robert Browning written in December 1855, a year before his letter about “Praxed’s,” John Ruskin complains to Browning about the sheer difficulty he faced trying to traverse the gaps and jagged unevenness of Browning’s poetry:

Your Ellipses are quite Unconscionable: before one can get through ten lines, one has to patch you up in twenty places, and if one hasn't much stuff of one's own to spare to patch with! You are worse than the worst Alpine Glacier I ever crossed. Bright, & deep enough truly, but so full of Clefts that half the Journey has to be done with ladder & hatchet. However, I have found some great things in you already, and I think you must be a wonderful mine, when I have real time & strength to set to work properly (DeLaura 326-7).

Several now-classic elements of Browning criticism make their appearance in Ruskin’s much-quoted image of Browning-as-glacier: the difficulty of his poetry, the strenuous, almost violent effort required of the reader, the promising but unrefined “mine” of

lapidary ideas and images that will gradually become apprehensible to the reader who perseveres. In return, Browning responds with what has often been taken to be his consummate definition of poetry, but which, viewed in its context, is revealed to be a defense of the deliberately imperfect realization of this configuration in his poetry:

I *know* that I don't make out my conception by my language, all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. You would have me paint it all plain out, which can't be; but by various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which *succeed* if they bear the conception from me to you (Letter dated 10 December, 1856; Cook and Wedderburn 36.xxxiv).

Browning's initial defensiveness regarding the lack of perfect correspondence between his finite images and infinite meanings grows into a vindication of the ability of his imperfect forms to not only convey meaning but also enhance it in the process. The fact that his forms do not correspond to conceptions – that the finite fails to contain and convey the infinite in straightforward terms – opens the way to semantic innovation, where the lack of correspondence generates new and unexpected combinations that communicate infinity to the reader by preserving and enhancing its multifariousness and indeterminacy. Herbert Tucker writes that the “infinite” in the above case denotes “not some eternal realm above mutability, but the conviction of endlessness or processionalism to which the careful imperfections of his art of disclosure give poetic currency” (12). The endless processionalism of infinity, however, calls for finite forms that are themselves endlessly in process by not cohering into a whole, and thereby continually generating new meanings and new images. Browning achieves this processionalism in his dramatic poetry by using imperfect and incomplete “touches and bits of outlines” which “*succeed*”

in bearing the conception from himself to his readers by paradoxically not bearing conceptions in direct, coherent terms, but instead requiring the reader to continually attempt to realize them in the imagination. The gap between the fragmented, finite image and the infinite meaning becomes the space in which the reader can realize his own subjectivity, in terms that are self-aware and provisional. Through this gap, Browning achieves the proximate but separate relation between “details” and “universal meaning” that characterizes his third class of poetry, at once subjective and objective in nature, and that brings his readers close to his own conception by paradoxically making them form their own.

The imperfect relationship between details and subjective inwardness is of course constitutive of aesthetic modernity itself, realized in the juxtaposition of highly particularized representations of subjective states and of external reality. In this chapter, I have sought to show how Browning’s grotesque art advances the core tendency of modern aesthetics through the dizzying delights of irreconciliation, the spiraling succession of images and meanings that are fecund in not being locked in perfect correspondence. This fecundity is exemplified above all in the seemingly lifeless proliferation of details, whose defiance of formal and epistemic coherence renders them sites for the generation of subjectivities. In the second half of my dissertation, I examine how this dialectic of subjective self-constitution in and through seemingly objective details plays out in the genre most identified with the anti-aesthetic tendencies of Victorian literature: the novel.

“Dwell on every detail and its possible meaning”:

The Subjective Details of *Middlemarch*

The most famous critical attempt at engaging with details in novels arguably does not engage with details at all. In “The Reality Effect” (1968), Roland Barthes, in keeping with the structuralist imperative to account for every element of narrative, recasts the very superfluity of details – their resistance to larger narratological or characterological structures – as a sign of their passive signification of a random and meaningless reality. Details are in his account an excess generated by absence: empty and superfluous “notations” that, lacking the narrative drives he considers central to the novel, can only function as the empty descriptions of material goods, which affirm a bourgeois ideal of “concrete reality” (146; see Rancière 2009). However, recent developments in aesthetic theory have identified a more sophisticated history of the detail, where its appearance of objectivity is implicated in the rise of aesthetics as a modern category of affective experience, and by extension the emergence and rise of modern subjectivity. Notably, Jacques Rancière and Isobel Armstrong have each proposed dialectical accounts of the role of the object that elicit exciting new conceptions of the subject. Such approaches necessitate a reconsideration of contemporary nineteenth-century literary criticism, which has generally tended to favor essentially stable and binaristic conceptions of subjects as well as objects. Critics have tended to view details as objects as opening the way to talk about the material determinants of British culture (as in the influential work of Elaine Freedgood). At the same time, criticism of nineteenth-century literature – particularly concerning the work of George Eliot, which I will examine in this chapter – has also favored humanistic conceptions of the subject that inheres in “a rich inner life,” a stable,

hidden core of interiority that is represented as growing through sympathetic exchange (Nussbaum 90). Is it possible, however, to interrogate the stable identities of the subject and of the object, by recovering the nineteenth-century interest in the ways they are mutually implicated – that is, by identifying how highly detailed representations of objective reality might also go towards forming the dynamic nature of perceiving *subjects*?

This chapter is a study of a crucial moment of engaging with details in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, but it is also intended as a contribution to the emergent new understanding of the detail in nineteenth-century culture. It argues that for details as an aesthetic category, the apparent objectivity of which is also a mode of constituting and representing subjectivity. Thus, it advances its claims in three parts. First, it indicates the limits of influential recent critical approaches to the detail in literary criticism, in relation to a key scene in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2). Secondly, it goes on to illustrate the formative influence on Eliot of idealism, a key nineteenth-century philosophy that perceives in the representation of reality the shaping activity of the mind, and that has surprising affinities with the empiricism which Eliot is principally connected. In my final three sections, I explore how Eliot's idealist engagement with details shapes the plot as well as the constitution of subjectivity in *Middlemarch*.

Given the tendency to assume that a chief characteristic of the realist novel is its profusion of details, and that being comfortable with details is a defining feature of Victorianism *tout court* in the popular imagination, what are we to make of a major Victorian novel in which the main character has to literally force herself to dwell on every detail? I have in mind the moment in *Middlemarch* when Dorothea “forc[es]

herself to dwell on every detail” of what she believes to have been an intimate scene between Will Ladislaw, the man she has come to love, and Rosamond Lydgate (485). Distraught at having found them together the previous day, she now suppresses her pain to review the scene carefully, revealing in the process the complicated relationship of details with emotion. Far from establishing clarity and objectivity, Dorothea’s attention to details is founded in, and heightens, her emotional indeterminacy: is she “forcing” herself as a kind of self-laceration, to dwell on what gives her pain, or as a cognitive exercise, to review what she believes to be true? This uncertainty also shapes Dorothea’s subsequent affective reaction. Her engagement with detail rouses her sympathy (that characteristic concern of Eliot’s), so that the detail becomes the formal element that links one life with another:

She began now to live through that yesterday morning deliberately again, forcing herself to dwell on every detail and its possible meaning. Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman’s life (485).

The strenuous, self-coercive effort of Dorothea’s attention to details pulls character and plot away from each other in the very moment of representing the former as “dwelling” on an event: we are *told* that Dorothea dwells on details, but not explicitly *shown* those details in the narrative. Their absence underlines the fact that they are internal to Dorothea’s memory and imagination, which is not presented to the reader. However, as every reader of *Middlemarch* knows, Dorothea’s memory of the scene is shaped by the erroneous premise that Will and Rosamond are physically or emotionally intimate. What appears to be a process of Dorothea’s inner cogitation or reflection is represented as a

more complex process, where her emotions determine her inner “dwelling,” and her interpretations arising from that dwelling, so that the distinction between thought and emotion is suspended. This suspension culminates in her sympathetic awakening, an ethical and imaginative triumph premised on an *epistemological* failure.

In transmuting error into awakening, the absent entities on which Dorothea “dwells” – details – now emerge as problematic forms that require critical attention. Their erroneous nature is not an aberration, but a realization of the contradictory nature of detail itself. Despite the tendency to minimize and naturalize the term, its sources suggest that detail is neither naturally-occurring nor trivial. Derived from the French *détailler* (to cut or to carve), “detail” does not denote a given or inconsequential entity: its existence is a reminder of the incisive activity of a subject that ‘carves’ an object into parts that embody its perception of that object, and by extension, the regime of affects, thoughts, and values governing that perception. The irony of Dorothea’s “dwelling,” where her scrupulous scrutiny of details resulting in a misguided epiphany, in fact illustrates the originary paradox of detail: that the apparent objectivity with which detail is invested is generated by the perception and analysis of a subject. In this context, irony, error, and ambiguity become the marks that reveal the impress of percipient subjects on the seemingly objective details they create.

If Eliot’s paradoxical, virtuosic (non-)representation of details points to an idea of objectivity that is not self-evident but constituted in a dialectical engagement with subjectivity, then the same can be said of subjectivity itself. The subjectivity that generates and reveals itself in details is not a coherent self distinct from those details, but constitutes and reconstitutes itself in repeated, contingent, and frequently erroneous acts

of perception. Jacques Rancière traces the proliferation of details in nineteenth-century realism to the multitudinous, indeterminate and shifting affective intensities that animate the category of everyday life. Arguing that details are not “descriptors of the visible” of Barthes’s account, but “operators producing differences of intensity” (“Politics” 2009), Rancière identifies details with the breakup of the classical order of narrative, where a causal sequence of momentous acts is committed by aristocratic characters, in favor of a democratic sensible order where anyone can feel extreme passions and sensations in everyday life: details “evinc[e] the capacity of anybody... to turn the routine of the everyday into the depth of passion” (2009). Rancière effectively reconceives details as sites of the emergence of modern subjectivity, which can *play* – that is “feel all kinds of ideal aspirations and sensuous frenzies” that were previously reserved for aristocrats, or (in Friedrich von Schiller’s foundational account of aesthetic play) by Greek gods (*Aisthesis* xiv-xv; see Schiller 69).¹ This conception of play that is realized in everyday experience is related to Dorothea’s erroneous “dwelling” on her absent details, which enables her to experience “ideal aspirations” in the mundane. Dorothea’s subjectivity is generated by her “dwelling” on details, through which she transforms an act of scrupulous scrutiny into an intense affective experience.

It might appear counterintuitive to view the seemingly lowly and static details of everyday life as forms for ceaseless and transformative aesthetic play. But Rancière’s democratization of play is derived from a central line of nineteenth-century thought that was also a key source for Eliot: the idealist philosophy of the G.W.F. Hegel, who

¹ Schiller describes play as a state of inner freedom, where one “combine[s] the greatest fullness of [sensuous] existence with the utmost self-dependence and freedom,” and engages with the world aesthetically, by imposing unifying form on its manifold phenomena (69).

democratizes Schillerian play by locating it in the details of “Romantic” or modern art, in particular genre painting.² In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel identifies these details as the creations of a free subjectivity that, as it takes itself for its subject, expresses its exuberance and skill in minute, virtuosic representations of incongruously humble scenes, which incongruity expresses the non-correspondence of form and content essential to modern or Romantic art. While we will revisit this argument later, I suggest that Hegel’s emphasis on the creation of details as a form of democratic *poiesis* or making that reflects the creator’s subjectivity helps us understand Eliot’s use of details to reveal the nature of her perceiving subjects. Like Hegel’s Dutch artists, Eliot uses details to depict the forming power of subjectivity. Where Hegel’s artists use the virtuosic play of light and color to reveal the origins of their representations of reality in their subjective activity, however, Eliot uses her highly allusive and figurative non-representation of details to at once constitute and problematize her perceiving subjects. Specifically, Eliot ironizes Dorothea’s imaginative engagement with details through her anonymous third-person narrator. The narrator’s omission of Dorothea’s misremembered and misleading details can be viewed as a particularly playful mode of representing those details. Through her non-representation of details, Eliot interrogates subjectivity in ways that have implications for the unfolding of the plot of *Middlemarch*. While the plot, in this reading,

² Eliot was certainly aware of Hegel’s aesthetic philosophy - in a letter to John Sibree Jr. (whose father, John Sibree, translated Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* in 1857), George Eliot praises and quotes what Hegel’s “*ideenvoll*” [full of ideas] observation on the power of sound: “We hardly know what it is to feel for human misery until we have heard a shriek: and a more perfect hell might be made out of sound than out of any preparation of fire and brimstone” (*Letters*, 1:245–48, 11 February 1848). Lewes himself owned a copy of the *Aesthetik*, which he carefully annotated (Dodd 152). (I am indebted to Ewan Jones for pointing out these sources). That said, I am less interested in establishing sources than I am in showing how Eliot uses detail to reveal the aesthetic and affective operations underlying the representation of the real.

proceeds through Dorothea's frequently misguided encounters with details, the narrator, rather than describe the details that Dorothea overlooks, represents those encounters in indirect terms that constantly dissolves the bounds of the perceiving subjects and the objects they observe.

Recently, Pearl S. Brilmyer perceptively analyzes descriptions in Eliot's late work as a mode of unraveling the unity and coherence of the self. Perception is bounded by the limits of the embodied, bounded self, so that the perception of extreme particularity – “hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat” – requires the “unraveling of the self into affects and impressions” (“Sensing Character” 48). Accordingly, Brilmyer traces how Eliot unravels the self in her last published novel, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), by “treating the human being not as a *subject* to which the author has special access but as a new kind of sensible *object* — a dense and complex material body like any other” (“Sensing Character” 36). Similarly, in *Middlemarch*, Eliot “pushe[s] back against the interiorized novelistic subject so often attributed to her by producing not only sympathetic and real-seeming minds but also lively and responsive characterological bodies” (“Plasticity” 60). While Brilmyer's identification of animated bodies – “sensible objects,” “characterological bodies” – usefully illustrates Eliot's destabilization of the unified subject, such identifications nevertheless risk privileging concepts of objectivity and materiality (even as metaphors) as the locus of meaning, the foundational entities from which other concepts derive their significance. Instead, as Eliot's non-representation of details shows, materiality and objectivity are themselves representations that, like subjectivity, are generated through a contingent process of perception. In focusing in details rather than things or bodies, I wish to foreground this mutually constitutive,

relational process between subjectivity and objectivity that destabilizes the binary between them, without privileging either entity. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot suspends the divide between subject and object, by depicting subjectivities are constituted by, and inheres in, the multiple and fragmented details they select and develop, or in Dorothea's case, fail to select and develop.

Eliot's details challenge prevalent critical views of the realism in *Middlemarch*. The canonical status of *Middlemarch* as a realist novel arguably stems from the widespread critical view that its plot dramatizes the empirical perception of the particulars that critics since Ian Watt have identified with realism. Catherine Gallagher summarizes this view: "[a]s Dorothea herself is realized by departures from type, so too does she learn to realize others by imagining their particularity instead of pressing them into categories" (70). While Gallagher revises this view by emphasizing the fictionality of the particulars Dorothea realizes, she does not consider how Dorothea's "particularization" is shaped by her subjective (mis)perceptions. This omission is illuminated by the distinction identified by Daniel Arasse between the Italian *particolare* (particular) and *dettaglio* (detail): while the *particolare* is "a small part of a figure, object or an ensemble" (the usual understanding of detail), the *dettaglio* is "the result or trace of the action of one who 'makes the detail'" (11). While Eliot's critics generally view *Middlemarch*'s details as impersonal *particolare*, Eliot portrays details in terms that reveal their status as *dettagli*, traces of the perceiver's mental activity. By strategically creating – or omitting – details to reveal Dorothea's subjective perception of those details, Eliot's narrator infuses details with a sense of personal style – the impress of the narrator's own selective subjectivity.

To view the details of the *Middlemarch* in terms of impersonality is to elide the personal nature of all details. Franco Moretti views realist details as descriptive “fillers” – impersonal minutiae of everyday life – that exemplify style as “plebeian fabrication,” where “[e]ach term is observed, measured, qualified, improved... [this is] prose as work” that creates a world where “uncertainty remains local, circumscribed” (383). However, the details created by Eliot’s narrator create an experience of everyday life that is charged with contingency, and exemplify a conscious artistic effort that dissolves the divide between aristocratic action and plebeian fabrication. Jacques Rancière identifies such a suspension in realist plots, where non-aristocratic characters frequently indulge in the idle play formerly reserved for gods and aristocrats: “The ‘doing nothing’ of the plebeian is the upheaval of the opposition between *acting* and *making*” (Rancière 2009). The non-activity of Eliot’s narrator realizes such a suspension in stylistic terms: by creatively depicting Dorothea’s “dwelling” by not depicting it at all, the narrator reconfigures the laborious fabrication of details as a mode of idle aesthetic play.

The narrator’s strategic playfulness is evident in the scene of Dorothea’s dwelling, where, instead of revealing the details on which Dorothea dwells, the narrator shifts to Dorothea’s imagination of Rosamond: “[Dorothea] forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman’s life.” This sudden shift of focus forces the reader to look for an explanation to the only available details – those presented in the original scene where Dorothea discovers Will and Rosamond:

Seated with his back towards her on a sofa which stood against the wall on a line with the door by which she had entered, she saw Will Ladislaw: close by him and turned towards him with a flushed tearfulness which gave a new brilliancy to her

face sat Rosamond, her bonnet hanging back, while Will leaning towards her clasped both her upraised hands in his and spoke with low-toned fervor (479).

This description zeroes in on parts of the scene as details without a context or larger whole. The scene, focalized through Dorothea's perspective, is rendered without interpretation, like a parody of literary objectivity in its combination of reserve and apparent significance. Its careful blankness, which has a psychological explanation in Dorothea's shock, has an aesthetic effect for the reader: it makes the scene curiously flat, without background or perspective. The objectification of Will and Rosamond is the formal correlative of Dorothea's swift unthinking certainty about their intimacy.

It is this earlier, unconscious objectification of Rosamond that Dorothea attempts to correct, when she "forc[es]" herself to think of Rosamond as an equal participant in the scene. Dorothea's "dwelling" on Rosamond would have consisted of concentrating on her as an animate detail, embedded in a larger moral context: a woman facing a marital crisis. Yet Dorothea's 'subjectivization' of Rosamond enacts the limits of her perception: the narrative offers no glimpse of exactly how she imagines Rosamond perceiving the scene. As a detail created by Dorothea, 'Rosamond' does not represent a fully-realized subject, but an imagined horizon of perceptive engagements with the world, without specifying any of those engagements. Instead of concrete particulars, Dorothea's "dwelling" creates faintly incised intimations of possible meanings that constantly demand and elude efforts at interpretation.

Idealism and Things; or, The Theory of Detail

To read realist details as created by subjects is to recover the oft-overlooked relationship between two sets of philosophical approaches usually viewed in opposition –

empiricism and idealism. Frances Ferguson identifies the affinities between Burke's skeptical empiricism – his “inability or refusal to distinguish between objects and mental objects [representations]” – and the Kantian account of the aesthetic as “the site for an examination of the meaningfulness of the very lack of fit between objects and the individuals that perceive them” (2-5). In the nineteenth century, this perceived gap between the viewing subject and the object led to conceptions of subjectivity that interrogated the divide between the two. Peter Garratt argues that nineteenth-century writers such as Eliot were increasingly aware that the self, the source of sensory experience, was constituted and rendered unstable by experience, so that the divide between subject and object was unstable: “If our knowledge claims must be made ultimately referable to sense experience, then self, knowledge, and reality soon threaten to shade into one another... [H]ow can a real world be disentangled from subjectivity?” (18). Garratt connects this “psychologist tendency” in empiricism to the idealist philosophy of Kant and Hegel, who held objects of knowledge to be dependent on the mind's activity; Kant was influenced by David Hume's argument that “all the sciences... are in some measure dependent on the science of MAN” (Hume 4; see Garratt 43), so that Eliot's and Lewes's empirical explorations of idealism are less unexpected than they might appear. To analyze Eliot's sensible details thus requires one to combine idealist and empirical approaches: to see in seemingly objective details the configuration and forming power of subjectivity.

Hegel's philosophy offers an apposite theoretical framework for understanding Eliot's use of details to develop subjectivities. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he views subjectivity not as a pre-existent and unified condition, but as a dialectical relationship

where the subject apprehends the object as an element of itself, thereby objectifying and reaffirming itself in the object: “Only this *self-restoring* Sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself... is the True” (10). Details give form to this mediating relationship, for the subject incises the object into parts in keeping with its own inner perceptions, affects, and thoughts, so that these then become inscribed on the object. Perceiving its own inner conceptions inscribed on the object precipitates the subject’s growth of self-consciousness.

In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel embodies the *Phenomenology*’s abstract dialectic of self-consciousness in concrete terms, by charting the subject’s growth of self-consciousness through progressively more detailed art forms. As we have seen in the previous chapters, Hegel’s conception of “Romantic” art – which includes the poetry and genre painting of the modern era – is characterized by excess details that signify an advanced subjectivity that no longer ‘fits’ in the world. Thus Hegel finds the presence of self-conscious subjectivity in the very virtuosity and accuracy of Romantic representations of external nature, which “make visible the liveliness of their treatment, the participation of the spirit, the mind's very indwelling in this uttermost extreme of externality” (2.794). In other words, the extreme semblance of materiality and objectivity, as represented in minute details of external objects, reveals the “liveliness” and affective play that comprises subjective inwardness. Nor is this a case of direct corresponded between matter and spirit: details reflect spirit only indirectly, through their virtuosic, mimetic representation of mundane things for their own sake, rather than directly expressing a specific, traceable thought or emotion. In this context, the representation of details is not

a reach towards reality and objectivity, but a source of instability, of the slippery disjunction between form and content.

Hegel's reading of details as reflecting subjectivity impacted his nineteenth-century readers. In his 1842 review of the *Aesthetics*, Eliot's partner G.H. Lewes includes a lengthy excerpt, likely translated by himself, from Hegel's analysis of Dutch art.³ Hegel presents Dutch art as manifesting a triumphant free subjectivity that revels in its own reflection in joyous scenes of humble life: "In these pictures of marriages, dances, feasts, there is always a free, joyous wantonness of spirit hovering over all... the feeling of freedom and animal spirits (*ausgelassenheit*) penetrates the whole" (Lewes 46, citing Hegel 1.217-18 [1835]). However, it is not only happy peasants that inspire Hegel's evocation of joyous spirit at play: it is detailed representation itself. As Rancière explains, for Hegel, the virtuosity of Dutch details that dazzlingly recreate humble scenes irrespective of their lowly content, reveals the real content of those scenes: "the freedom of [the Dutch] people that gave itself its own way of life and prosperity... and rejoice in a disinterested way at the image of this universe, created by artifice" (*Aisthesis* 32-33). Hegel thus makes it possible to envisage the accuracy and virtuosity of Dutch details as manifestations of the free play of the artist's subjectivity, reflected in the play of the peasants he depicts.

Lewes evidently noted the implications of Hegel's analysis of Dutch details for literature, for he follows the above excerpt with another excerpt where Hegel explores "particularity" in drama. A dramatist can develop a character's chief "pathos" or passion into "vitality and subjectivity" by cultivating "particularity," where "the [character] has

³ Translations of the *Aesthetics* into English only began in 1879.

space given him to develop [sic] himself in several situations, and the whole riches of his internal nature are brought into play” (Lewes 47, citing Hegel 1.306-7 [1835]; see 2.239 [1977]). Notably, Lewes’s use of “play” is not found in either Hotho’s edition or in Knox’s translation, both of which emphasize the “preserv[ation]” of “vitality” in character (“die volle Lebendigkeit... bewahrt bleiben,” 1.306-7 [1835]). By substituting “play” for “preservation,” Lewes indicates a more dynamic idea of character, where a character’s multiple engagements can complicate and even destabilize the idea of a central pathos, and by extension, of character itself as a coherent and unified entity. Details enable the representation of increasingly complex and dynamic subjectivities, through the creation of minutely detailed scenarios that enable different aspects of the character to play.

Hegel’s view of details (as mediated by Lewes) as a form that can facilitate the creation of dynamic subjectivities has a complex afterlife in Eliot’s realism. In her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), Eliot famously takes the “vulgar details” of Dutch art as a model for her realism, praising the “rare, precious quality of truthfulness [of] these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence” (157). Eliot thus identifies the form (minute details) and content (everyday domestic scenes) of Dutch art with humble truthfulness, in opposition to the historical and mythological subjects of Italian art, which depicted the realm of ideal forms and abstract ideas. Ruth Bernard Yeazell perceptively argues that Eliot chose Dutch art as a model precisely because it represented the opposite of her original impulses towards philosophic abstraction, which were closer to the nineteenth-century view of the Italian ideal. Eliot had described her “severe effort of trying to make certain things thoroughly incarnate, as if they revealed themselves to me

first in the flesh, and not in the spirit” (*Letters* 4:300-301) – that is, she first saw things abstractly rather than in their fleshly particularity. Dutch art, with its ambiguously secular “faithful imitations of mundane appearances,” offered Eliot a theme to ‘incarnate’ her abstract impulses in concrete representations of everyday life (Yeazell 112). However, as Lewes’s excerpt from Hegel indicates, Dutch details are not quite the transparently objective representational mode that Eliot seeks: as expressions of the artist’s subjective, aesthetic play, they unsettle – or distort – objective truth in the process of representing it. The result is a curiously strained realism, where Eliot’s use of details to depict subjectivities is accompanied by her insistent attempts to deny the subjective tendencies of detail as a *form*. Her paradoxical use of details as a purely objective form for depicting subjective states is evident in her own take on Hegel’s “marriages, dances, feasts”:

I turn to that village wedding... where an awkward bridegroom opens the dance with a high-shouldered, broad-faced bride, while elderly and middle-aged friends look on, with very irregular noses and lips, and probably with quart-pots in their hands, but with an expression of unmistakable contentment and good-will (157).

As Eliot’s details unwind Hegel’s “marriages, dances, feasts” into a meticulous description of a Breughelesque wedding scene, they distance the “joyous wantonness of spirit” that Hegel finds in Dutch art. Eliot limits “contentment” to the picture’s content, while describing its detailed mode of representation as a matter of “pain” (158). Eliot frames this “pain” as the price of accurate representation, calling for artists who are “ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things” (158).

“Pain” indicates Eliot’s awareness of the impossibility of trying to use details – a highly aesthetic form that expresses the self-conscious forming subjectivity of the artist – as a mode representing reality objectively. It is in this context that her most poignant description of the challenge she faces as a novelist emerges:

[M]y strongest effort is... to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed... but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath (155).

George Levine views this declaration as evincing Eliot’s “awareness of how very hard it is to [tell the truth]” (2002, 26), and by extension, a Victorian realism that, while not naively believing in “the correspondence between word and thing,” nevertheless strains to embrace the possibility of “the reality that stretched beyond language” (1981, 12).

However, it is not only hard to tell the truth – it is impossible. The most faithful detail is already a representation, formed or “distorted” by the author’s perceiving subjectivity. This awareness of impending failure that engenders her narrator’s resolve to attempt “faithful” representation. For Eliot, the real aesthetic challenge lies in working one’s consciously subjective images into accurate details. The mirror’s “defective[ness]” and “disturbed” images underline her struggle to transform the subjective details of Dutch art into a simulation of objectivity.

Eliot’s discomfort with details’ subjective nature also shapes her use of details to develop her characters’ “subjectivity and vitality.” The occasion of her defense of Dutch details is her account of the “flawed” clergyman, the Reverend Irwine, who fails to

discourage Arthur Donnithorne's infatuation with Hetty Sorrel. Eliot's narrator reframes Irwine's "fault" as clergyman (his failure to understand another at a crucial juncture) as his success as a character: being a flesh-and-blood clergyman, with a sympathetic understanding of his fellow flawed humans, Irwine exemplifies the realism Eliot espouses. However, her defense does not address the grave implications of his 'failure': his inability to advise Arthur unwittingly facilitates the latter's eventual seduction of Hetty. The narrator explicitly attributes Irwine's (in)action to his reluctance to pursue details: "If there had been anything special on Arthur's mind in the previous conversation, *it was clear he was not inclined to enter into details*, and Mr. Irwine was too delicate to imply even a friendly curiosity" (154; my emphasis). While Irwine's hesitation can be interpreted as gentlemanly reserve, formally it represents a disinclination to engage with details: ironically, Irwine's flaw is that he is not detailed enough. His discomfort with details can be viewed as reflecting Eliot's discomfort with using details as a "truthful" representational mode.

During her career, however, Eliot evinces increasing fascination with the subjective intensities that details encode. In "Notes on Form in Art" (1868), she attempts an understanding of form that accounts for the role of subjectivity in determining the relationships of parts and wholes:

Form, as an element of human experience, must begin with the perception of separateness... things must be recognized as separate wholes before they can be recognized as wholes composed of parts, or before these wholes again can be regarded as relatively parts of a larger whole (232).

To define form appears to be the opposite of seeing details: one must first perceive wholes before one perceives parts. Yet Eliot's very insistence on perceiving wholes first betrays her awareness that the distinction between the parts and wholes becomes unsustainable – a whole that comprises smaller parts might itself form part of a larger whole – so that the relationship depends on the forming activity of a perceiver. Form itself is determined by, and becomes the expression of, inner states: it is “a set of relations selected and combined in accordance with the sequence of mental states in the constructor, or with the preconception of a whole he has inwardly evolved” (233).

Eliot's emphasis on the subjective nature of form leads her to highlight the art form she considers most illustrative of this subjectivity: “poetry” (which Eliot equates with “all literary production,” 233). She asserts that poetry is “superior” to all other arts for depicting subjectivity, for it functions in the spiritual medium of language, which “the least imitative [medium] and is in the most complex relation with what it expresses,” translating its subjects to a mental and metaphorical plane (234). The relationship of parts and wholes in poetry is thus particularly suited to express inner states: “*Poetic Form* begins with a choice of elements, however meagre, as the accordant expression of emotional states” (234-5).

Eliot's view of poetic form as expressive of “emotional states” recalls Hegel's view of poetry as the most spiritually conscious Romantic art, where language (“the form of the inner life”) expresses the “inner consciousness” as well as “the special and particular details of what exists externally,” so that external details become the formal correlative of inner states. Hegel's alignment of poetic detail and emotion anticipates Eliot's use of details to depict subjectivities in *Middlemarch*. However, while Hegel was

concerned with poetry, Eliot creates details in prose. Hegel only viewed poetic language, with its “metaphorical and figurative [and thus] relatively unclear and inaccurate” nature, as capable of the virtuosic representation of subjective states; prose, with its “literal accuracy,” was only fit for analysis and ordinary speech (2.1005). Eliot’s prose details, however, achieve a poetic figurativeness that also serves an analytic purpose: through their playful vagueness, Eliot exposes and interrogates the perceptions of her subjects. We have already seen how Eliot uses absence to subject Dorothea’s “dwelling” to scrutiny. In the rest of this essay, I will return to Eliot’s use of vagueness – a carefully calibrated lack of detail – to dramatize the struggling perception of a non-reader of details even more neglectful than Irwine: Dorothea Brooke.

In her virtuosic non-representation of details, Eliot at once extends Hegel’s concept of poetic virtuosity to prose, and subverts it by using virtuosity as a means of elision. This becomes the basis of the claims of her chosen genre – the novel – to aesthetic status. Hegel’s view of prose had led to his notorious neglect of the aesthetic capacities of the novel genre, which, as an entity associated with the prose of the world, did not represent the spirit’s ascent to freedom and self-realization in any case. Instead, novels only dramatized the *Lehrjahre* or “apprenticeship” of the hero (Hegel derives this from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*), by which he enters “into the concatenation of the world”: “However much he may have quarrelled with the world, or been pushed about in it, in most cases at last he gets his girl and some sort of position, marries her, and becomes as good a Philistine as others” (1.593). The novel genre thus manifests the shapelessness of the world of prose, by dramatizing the self’s dwindling and disappearance into that world. Hegelian critics have sought to rehabilitate the novel by

finding in the novel a semblance of form. Georg Lukacs in his *The Theory of the Novel* (which Naomi Schor describes as “virtually a supplement to the *Aesthetics*,” 32) famously sees novelistic form as capable of ideal unities, by constructing “an extensive totality of life” in an age where this totality is no longer a given (56). Benjamin Rutter identifies the novel’s aesthetic capacities with its virtuosity, wherein the novelist at once redeems and ironizes the “triviality of bourgeois life” with the “brilliance of the writer’s style” – as manifested in Joycean epiphanies, for instance (111). In representing the trajectory of Dorothea, Eliot offers a third way to envisage the novel as an aesthetic form, one that has aspects of the previous approaches. Superficially, Dorothea’s trajectory indeed follows the dwindling and descent into anonymous, everyday existence, as we shall see in the last section of this chapter. This trajectory, however, is rendered ambiguous and contingent by Dorothea’s misperceptions of details, which are represented through their elision, and which lead to epiphanies that are ironized in their erroneous origins. Eliot’s non-representation of Dorothea’s misinterpreted details give form to her equivocal affective experiences that elude being interpreted in terms of a single trajectory of character growth or diminishment.

Details, What Details?

Middlemarch is in the anomalous position of being a text on detail without being especially rich in the minute descriptive particulars commonly identified as “details.” The reader is told that the Brooke sisters are a dark and a fair pair, but is denied further concrete particulars about their appearances. While *Adam Bede*’s narrator renders details such the touch of sunlight that “lit up [Dinah’s] pale red hair to auburn” (67) with the precision of the Dutch paintings celebrated in the novel, *Middlemarch*’s narrator reveals

nothing at first of the color of Dorothea's eyes, the features of her face – details that might have helped us visualize the paradoxical beauty that is “thrown into relief by poor dress” (5). Such details as the narrator provides are remarkably allusive and abstract: “Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters” (5). Elaine Freedgood reads in this description “the precise dictation of a narrator who makes connections and comparisons exhaustively and authoritatively,” creating a descriptive excess that specifies meaning (120). But this descriptive excess does surprisingly little work to render Dorothea in concrete terms, instead requiring from the reader a conscious and heightened effort of imagination. To visualize Dorothea, the reader must not only have a rarefied knowledge of Italian Madonna paintings – the idealized opposite of Dutch paintings – but also mentally incise the detail of the hand in the sleeve. In making the reader imaginatively ‘carve’ details from a genre of art associated with ideality, *Middlemarch*'s narrator makes the reader conscious of the origins of his experience of reality in his subjective perception and imagination.

The subjective nature of detail is central to key moments in the plot, as revealed in the very first mention of “detail” in the narrative, where Dorothea brusquely responds to Celia's gossip:

“Tantripp [the maid]... said that Sir James's man knew from Mrs. Cadwallader's maid that Sir James [Chettam] was to marry the eldest Miss Brooke.”

“How can you let Tantripp talk such gossip to you, Celia?” said Dorothea, indignantly, not the less angry because details asleep in her memory were now awakened to confirm the unwelcome revelation (23).

In what will become a recurrent pattern, the supposedly omniscient third-person narrator does not reveal *what* details, noted unconsciously by Dorothea during her encounters with Chettam, are now “awakened” in her mind. The narrator’s coy “details asleep” toy with the reader, making him or her (like Dorothea), return to the encounter with Chettam in the previous chapter to try to identify the details in question. However, scanning the narrative of Dorothea’s encounter only makes the reader increasingly aware of depending on his or her imagination and interpretation. In contrast, Dorothea’s own lack of engagement with details enacts her obliviousness of Chettam’s motives. In this context, we find a possible example of the kind of detail that was later “awakened” in Dorothea’s mind:

The thought that he had made the mistake of paying his addresses to herself could not take shape... But he was positively obtrusive at this moment, and his dimpled hands were quite offensive (19).

Chettam’s dimpled hands exemplify detail as fleshly materiality; they fascinate Dorothea precisely by repulsing her. Dorothea’s attention distinguishes Chettam’s hands from the empty material details Barthes describes in “The Reality Effect” – particulars that are unnoticed by the characters and insignificant to the narrative – and instead recalls the photographic detail Barthes describes in *Camera Lucida*, the *punctum* that transfixes the viewer: “the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [the viewer]” (26). The *punctum* encodes a sense of personal significance for the viewer, who, recognizes his or her desires exemplified in an element of the wider scene of undifferentiated details (“*studium*”), and carves it out perceptually as a detail. In Dorothea’s case, however, this process is unconscious and incomplete. She concentrates

on Chettam's hands without considering their significance to her, that they are metonymic of his unspoken marriage proposal. Her conscious repulsion, which literalizes her unconscious rejection of Chettam's hand in marriage, signifies her incomplete engagement with details: though she apprehends details unconsciously, she cannot yet interpret their significance to herself.

Dorothea's lack of engagement with details signifies her rejection of the seemingly trivial world of everyday life with which they are associated. Before encountering Chettam, she was immersed in dreams of an ideal "visionary future" as the wife of the scholarly Casaubon: "There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things" (19). This accords with the narrator's characterization of Dorothea as a latter-day Saint Theresa, whose "ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent" nature is "hemmed in" by a narrow social existence (5). Marriage to Casaubon, with its promise of intellectual and spiritual fulfillment, not only offers an escape from triviality, but an apotheosis of her ideal nature. That she should encounter Chettam while immersed in such ideal dreams underscores their irony, for, of course, they are based on a misreading of details concerning Casaubon, and are soon disappointed. The narrator suggests the irony of her dreams by representing her, in her state of ideal passion, in more concrete terms than previously used:

She walked briskly in the brisk air ... [s]he wore her brown hair flatly braided and coiled behind so as to expose the outline of her head in a daring manner at a time when public feeling required the meagerness of nature to be dissimulated by tall barricades of frizzed curls... [T]here was nothing of an ascetic's expression in her bright full eyes, as she looked before her, not consciously seeing, but absorbing

into the intensity of her mood, the solemn glory of the afternoon with its long swathes of light (18).

The narrator paradoxically uses an unprecedented degree of particularity (even revealing her hair color!) to convey the limitations of Dorothea's subjectivity. Dorothea's "bright, full eyes" do not "consciously see" the glorious swathes of light, but unconsciously "absorb" them into her ideal "mood," where they re-surface metaphorically in her abstract "notions of marriage" that "[take] their color entirely from an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of life" (17). As the narrator's liminal details blur the boundary between Dorothea's external environment and her half-conscious inner life, they also suspend the distinctions between description, ironic commentary, and narrative, creating a highly self-conscious representation of Dorothea's "unconscious" state that anticipates her marital trajectory.

"Questionable details"

The narrator's paradoxical use of particularity to enhance uncertainty continues in the account of Dorothea's married life, where she is forced into a consciousness of "every-day things" by the marriage she had intended as an escape from triviality. During her disappointing honeymoon at Rome, Dorothea reassesses her courtship:

In their conversation before marriage, Mr. Casaubon had often dwelt on some explanation or *questionable detail* of which Dorothea did not see the bearing but such imperfect coherence seemed due to the brokenness of their intercourse, and, supported by her faith in their future, she had listened with fervid patience to a recitation of possible arguments to be brought against Mr. Casaubon's entirely new view of the Philistine god Dagon and other fish-deities (123; my emphasis).

This is the first time the narrator mentions any “questionable details” in Dorothea’s courtship, so the effect is to again send the reader – like Dorothea – looking back over the narrative of her courtship for any reference to “Dagon.” Ironically, however, the closest the narrative offers to a specific reference are the unspecified “historical instances” that Casaubon had offered Dorothea to substantiate her religious faith, and that consolidated Dorothea’s own “fervid” faith in Casaubon. The narrator’s description of Dorothea’s faith conveys all her ecstasy at the prospect of spiritual fulfillment – tempered with the narrator’s irony: “Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable, and in girls of sweet, ardent nature, every sign is apt to conjure up wonder, hope, belief, vast as a sky, and colored by a diffused thimbleful of matter in the shape of knowledge.” While Dorothea had apprehended “signs” of Casaubon’s discourse as “questionable details,” she had sanguinely imagined an “illimitable” future discourse in which they cohered. Now she understands that the “questionable details” signify the meaninglessness of Casaubon’s discourse as a whole. By keeping these “questionable details” hidden in Dorothea’s mind, the narrator renders them doubly questionable to the reader.

“Questionable details” not only shape *Middlemarch*’s cryptic descriptions, but also drive its plot. Both Dorothea’s previous ecstatic misreadings, and her present bewildered re-cognition are key narrative moments: while the former led her to marry Casaubon, the latter marks her marital disillusionment. However, these moments also complicate the idea of narrative progression, for Dorothea’s re-cognition of “questionable details” leads to no inner insight or narrative resolution, but rather to a bewildered floundering that anticipates her confused engagements with details for the rest of the novel:

[T]o have been driven to be more particular would have been like trying to give a history of the lights and shadows, for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr. Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing... from what it had been in her maiden dream (124).

“Play of light and shadows” recalls the earlier play of light that Dorothea, immersed in her ideal dreams of marriage, did not see. Now she can dimly perceive this play as encapsulating the history of her marriage, but it remains diffuse and in flux, not a series of distinct events that can be itemized or historicized. The re-use of this abstract metaphor to convey the “endless minutiae” of Dorothea’s experience of marriage illustrates the narrator’s strategy of using details to enhance narrative and affective ambiguity. Dorothea’s marital experience is effectively too detailed to detail: it proceeds through super-subtle processes of change (“endless minutiae”) of which she is vaguely aware, without being able to narrativize or interpret them. The narrator’s self-consciously “general” description, which reflects Dorothea’s limited consciousness of her marital history, conveys the impossibility of representing this “history of the lights and shadows” in direct terms: it can only be rendered allusively, through aesthetic strategies that complicate the reality they effect.

While the narrator had used aestheticized descriptions to convey Dorothea’s incomprehension of details, the narrator now draws on aesthetic discourses of detail to dramatize her struggles through her bewildered encounters with the art of Rome. Dorothea had imagined Rome, the “city of visible history” and “the interpreter of the world,” as the ideal place in which to begin her “visionary future” with Casaubon. J.

Hillis Miller argues that Rome in *Middlemarch* is a place where “over the centuries has congregated the most intense activity of interpretation,” so that “Dorothea’s response to Rome adds itself to layer upon layer of interpretations of it which have been made before” (467). But Dorothea’s experience of Rome is remarkable for her disorientation and *lack* of responsiveness, which mirrors her bewildered experience of marriage:

Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present... the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual... jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion (124).

This highly aestheticized description depicts the artworks that overwhelm Dorothea as concrete manifestations of her “struggling” marital incomprehension. The narrator renders the statues as struggling consciousness made sensuous form: the dim marble eyes, which reflect Dorothea’s unseeing eyes, contain “the monotonous light of an alien world”; “Titanic life gazing and struggling” embodies spirit frozen in its struggle towards awareness. The description recalls Hegel’s characterization of Classical art in terms of self-contained, inexpressive perfection, which has not yet attained the particularity of specific emotions or external details (2.725). The narrative reworks the Classical perfection that Dorothea does not see into externalizations of Dorothea’s own frozen inner struggle.

We see Dorothea’s inner struggle reflected in the succession of progressively detailed artworks in the “Ariadne” scene. Dorothea’s abstracted pose beside the

Ariadne/Cleopatra statue inspires Will and his friend, the painter Naumann, to debate the most suitable medium of art to represent her, in terms that recall Hegel's trajectory of increasingly conscious and particularized art forms. While Naumann suggests painting her, thereby reflecting the Hegelian conception of painting as a more particularized art form than sculpture than can depict conscious subjectivities, Will's suggestion of language is more in keeping with Dorothea's inner state:

Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection. I feel that especially about representations of women. As if a woman were a mere colored superficies! You must wait for movement and tone. There is a difference in their very breathing: they change from moment to moment (122).

Will's invocation of the fortunate imprecision of language touches on a key quality of language. As a medium of expression, language is indeed imprecise compared to painting, for, unlike (figurative) art, it consists of a set of signs that do not resemble anything. However, this imprecision is the corollary of its greater spiritual quality: as its arbitrary symbols derive their meaning from man's mental activity, so they can only be deciphered mentally. Thus, language can depict in even greater detail than painting, through signs that signify only in the mind of the perceiver: "poetry... brings the objective world before our eyes in a breadth and variety which even painting cannot achieve... yet this always remains only a real existence in the *inner* consciousness" (*Aesthetics* 2.832). Language enables man to both mentally create and realize mental images that trace the shifts of consciousness.

The capacity of language to depict consciousness, however, also includes its capacity to depict the *lack* of consciousness, which the narrator uses to great effect, by revealing how Will's description of "vague[ness]" also applies to Dorothea's mental state during the "Ariadne" scene:

She did not really see the streak of sunlight on the floor more than she saw the statues: she was inwardly seeing the light of years to come in her own home... and feeling that the way in which they might be filled with joyful devotedness was not so clear to her as it had been (130).

The glorious play of light and shadow that Dorothea had unconsciously absorbed during her afternoon walk now reappears, dimmer and more obscure, in her abstract visualization of a clouded future. The light she imagines filling her home ironically highlights her mental inability to imagine a future similarly filled with "joyful devotedness." Dorothea's inner vagueness, skillfully enacted by the narrator's description, inadvertently illuminates the "vagueness" of language that Will praises.

The narrator's later description of Dorothea, after her return from her honeymoon, indicates her unconscious awakening. The narrator's descriptive details render Dorothea in the most concrete terms used for her in the novel (we finally get to know the color of her eyes – hazel!), even as they continually trace her particulars back to their ideational categories, so that Dorothea's remains incomplete:

[T]here was gem-like brightness on [Dorothea's] coiled hair and in her hazel eyes; there was warm red life in her lips; her throat had a breathing whiteness above the differing white of the fur which itself seemed to wind about her neck and cling down her blue-gray pelisse with a tenderness gathered from her own, a sentient

commingled innocence which kept its loveliness against the crystalline purity of the outdoor snow (172).

Eliot's stylistic details commingle ideas and things, both individually and as categories. The narrator describes the fur as clinging to Dorothea with a "tenderness" taken from Dorothea herself. As it winds round Dorothea, this "tenderness" quickens into becomes a sentient quality with an existence of its own ("sentient commingled innocence"), alive as the "differing whiteness" of Dorothea's throat. The path to sentience lies through objectification: Dorothea's "tenderness" becomes a sentient thing once it assumes sensuous form in Dorothea's white fur, which is itself animated by Dorothea's "tenderness." Catherine Gallagher describes Dorothea's trajectory in *Middlemarch* as "turn toward generic consciousness through embodiment": in a double inversion of empiricism, the narrator realizes Dorothea in terms of increasingly concrete particulars that are realized fictionally from ideal categories that are in turn deduced from real-world instances (72). However, the narrator's conflation of ideal categories and concrete particulars renders Dorothea's particularization contingent and incomplete: she is not aware that Will loves her, nor that she is gradually falling in love with him. While critics have read Will's encounter with Dorothea as marking her erotic awakening, as Ariadne was wakened by Dionysus (Rischin 1127-28), it is important to recognize the contingent and unconscious paths by which romantic fulfillment and narrative movement proceed.

"Dwell on every detail and its possible meaning"

The absence of the details on which Dorothea "dwells" in the scene with which I opened seems less incongruous when viewed in the context of the vagueness that characterizes her previous engagements with detail. This view might surprise to readers

accustomed to seeing Dorothea's trajectory as one towards increasing clarity and objectivity. Suzy Anger views Dorothea's resolution to "dwell" on detail after her dark night of the soul as a "progress... towards more accurate – because less subjective – knowledge" (91-2). But subjectivity and objectivity are not opposed, as Anger's argument suggests. Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston explain how the nineteenth-century pursuit of objectivity as an epistemic and moral virtue is inseparable from the increasing awareness of subjectivity as a distorting force to be suppressed. Objectivity can only be attained through "the negating of subjectivity by the subject," so that practices aimed at cultivating objectivity – such as empirical observation and scrupulous "dwelling" on details – paradoxically intensify the self they are intended to suppress (Galison and Daston 204). The strenuous, self-coercive force of Dorothea's "dwelling," as she struggles to suppress her feelings for Will in favor of sympathizing with a woman apparently intimate with him, results in such an intensification of subjectivity, which in turn diffused in, and energizes, the liminal details it creates.

The narrator describes Dorothea's intense inner state as suspending the divide between thought and emotion: it is both "active thought" and "vivid sympathetic experience" that "assert[s] itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself," without actually being knowledge (485-86). This blurring of thought and emotion shapes an obscure visual experience, which the narrator renders in terms at once detailed and diffuse:

She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving –perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky

was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labor and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining (486).

While it is commonly accepted that this scene resembles a landscape painting, it is important to place this moment in relation to Dorothea's previous visualizations of light and landscape. This scene is at once more detailed and more obscure than her earlier visions: for the first time, she perceives figures in the field, like details in the background of a landscape painting. However, these figures are also anonymous and generalized. Their vagueness is enacted by the narrator's increasingly indistinct description, as it moves from the relatively clear objects in the foreground to the figures in the background, before dissolving into thought.

The obscurity of these figures is the result of a carefully crafted strategy of narrative vagueness. It is unclear who is seeing the figures, the narrator or Dorothea, and if the thoughts are Dorothea's inner realization or the narrator's prescriptive commentary. That the perceiving subjects and perceived objects mirror each other in their obscurity points to a perceptual process similar to the aesthetic play described by Armstrong: "a constant negotiation of in-betweenness," where "self and other are co-ordinates rather than fixed entities" (Armstrong 60). Armstrong locates this "in-betweenness" in the artwork that is created through play, and that becomes a "transitive, interactive" form that is both subject and object (60). We may view the figures, live details in the distance, as performing and heightening the fusion of subject and object achieved in aesthetic play: they are at once objects of Dorothea's and/or the narrator's aesthetic play, while also

being subjects in their own right. In their obscurity, they require Dorothea to employ her sympathetic imagination in making repeated attempts at apprehending them in more exact terms, even as they elude those attempts.

Instead of detracting from Dorothea's sympathetic awakening, the figures' vagueness precipitates that awakening. It can be argued that these obscure but meaningful figures in the uncertain distance enable Dorothea herself to experience a state of play – to feel her particular existence to be part of a larger ideal or social order, or (to borrow the narrator's words) to feel part of the "largeness of the world." This formulation suggests that the creative activity of Dorothea's aesthetic play not only animates the details in the distance, but charges her experience of the larger world with a sense of animation, of "involuntary, palpitating life." To experience this living world entails unraveling the bounds of Dorothea's subjectivity, so that her sensible capacities are free to expand and take in the entirety of the world's "largeness." Yet the very vagueness and limitlessness of this "largeness" suggests an experience of fecund indeterminacy, of infinite affective and narrative possibilities that resist realization, rather than a stable state that translates into specific acts. Dorothea's unclear visualization of the figures results in a similarly imprecise resolution: "What she would resolve to do that day did not yet seem quite clear, but something that she could achieve stirred her as with an approaching murmur which would soon gather distinctness" (485). As with her detailing of Rosamond, her resolution is poised on the edge of vagueness, gesturing towards specific engagements with the world that confound realization (her one documented attempt has ironic consequences: when she later visits Rosamond, the latter reveals that she and Will are not intimate after all), making possible their eventual union.

That Rosamond inadvertently paves the way for Dorothea's integration into everyday, bourgeois existence, is fitting due to Rosamond's own alignment with details by the narrator. Out of all the characters of *Middlemarch*, Rosamond is consistently and exhaustively described in terms of external, sensuous details, and aligned with the sphere of everyday, domestic banality. The reader is constantly told of her "hair of infantine fairness, neither flaxen nor yellow," "eyes of heavenly blue," "the delicate undulations" of her "slim figure displayed by her riding-habit," and so on (72). But these alluring details are purely sensuous and devoid of subjectivity; they do not enable the imagination of Rosamond as having an "equivalent centre of self." They mark her as an object of desire even as they infantilize her, in contrast to Dorothea, frequently idealized and maternal-ized as a Madonna-figure. To see them face to face is to witness another "fine bit of antithesis" (to recall Naumann's words) between two kinds of feminized detail: one that is idealized but gradually attaining sensuous particularity, and another that consists entirely of material details. Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* similarly contrasts two kinds of detail represented by photographic images of two twentieth-century screen heroines: the "Divine" Greta Garbo, whose photos are meant to convey "the essence on her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where all things are formed" even as they show faint stirrings of life and particularity, and Audrey Hepburn, whose photographs show a greater degree of specification, and a concomitant degrading of thematic category: "the face of Audrey Hepburn, for instance, is individualized, not only because of its particular thematics (woman as child, woman as kitten) but also because of her person, an almost unique specification of the face, which has nothing of the essence left in it, but is constituted by an infinite complexity of morphological functions"

(*Mythologies* 57; see Schor 97-99). Certainly, Dorothea's characterization of as an awakened Ariadne aligns her with Barthes's thawing goddess, while Rosamond's constant touching of her hair is described by the narrator as "a habitual gesture... as pretty as any movements of a kitten's paw" (102).

And yet the details in *Middlemarch* undermine any strict classification of detail. Individual details are revealed as possessing subjective and sensible qualities in their very appearance of objectivity (as in the description of Dorothea's fur), while collectively details signify an idea of subjectivity that inheres in multiple affective and interpretive possibilities. In light of the novel's questioning of the divide between sensuousness and subjectivity, the difference between Dorothea and Rosamond, and their associated regimes of detail, is a matter of degree rather than kind. Like the earlier "antithesis" between Dorothea and the Ariadne/Cleopatra, the antithesis between Rosamond and Dorothea can be seen in terms of continuity, where the lives of both are intertwined in unexpected and mutually supportive ways. Dorothea succeeds in her mission of providing succor to Rosamond, while Rosamond herself makes Dorothea's marriage possible.

Dorothea's peculiar mix of detail and diffusiveness is reflected in the narration of her fate in *Middlemarch*'s famous "Finale." The narrator tells us that as Will Ladislaw's wife and helpmeet, she is viewed by others as being "absorbed into the life of another... only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother" (515). This is an anticlimactic, even tragic, ending, as suggested in the narrator's surprisingly violent metaphor from Herodotus, which compares Dorothea to the river dammed by Cyrus the Great: "Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth" (515). The woman who had longed for an ideal life is

now herself dispersed among hindrances into minute parts – into details too fine to be detailed by the narrator.

However, the narrator's description of Dorothea's fate offers another reading. Addressing the reader, the narrator asserts that Dorothea's "effect... on those around her was incalculably diffusive" (515). As a description, "incalculably diffusive" enacts the diffusiveness it describes: its tantalizing vagueness invites, and exceeds, multiple attempts from the reader to imaginatively 'carve' out the precise workings of Dorothea's "effect." To attempt a mental carving of Dorothea's acts, the reader must embrace the fact that details are created by the forming power of subjectivity. Embracing this practice might enable the reader to continue the narrator's work of detailing Dorothea's acts, adding to the potentially infinite details of those acts by other readers.

The subjective details of *Middlemarch* embody an alternative to the dominant view of the "reality effect" conventionally ascribed to details, for they effect not a single, fixed reality, but a manifold sensible reality where every moment is imbued with infinite possibilities for feeling. By enabling the reader to try and achieve at least some of these possibilities, Eliot's subjective details enable her to effect an aesthetic education in the Schillerian sense: they empower the reader to play, to imaginatively form multiple aesthetic engagements with the world. In the process, the reader's subjectivity is opened, and his or her sensible capacities expanded to take in as many sensations as possible. Yet Eliot's details do not offer specific, attainable experiential goals, but an epistemic and affective indeterminacy that rouses multiple attempts at interpretation precisely because it eludes finality.

The Dissolute Details of Aestheticism

In 1877, the professional beauty Lillie Langtry received an unexpected visit from what one is tempted to characterize as the “bushy”-browed and “leonine”-bearded past of Victorian aesthetics, escorted by its dandified, lily-carrying future (140). Langtry’s friend, the then up-and-coming playwright Oscar Wilde, who was already making a name of himself with his aesthetic mannerisms, had brought along the ageing art critic John Ruskin, whose raging defenses of Turner and of details in art were now consecrated – but not tamed – by his appointment as the Slade Professor of Art at the University of Oxford. Even more surprising than the visit itself was Wilde’s demeanor towards Ruskin: his carefully curated flamboyance and flippant wit were replaced by what a mystified Langtry identified as “such extreme reverence and humility towards the ‘master’ that he could scarcely find breath to introduce him to me” (140). For Wilde was a self-proclaimed proponent of “art for art’s sake,” and his insistence on the self-sufficient primacy of “the sensuous element in art” represented, as he himself put it, “a departure from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin, - a departure definite and different and decisive” (“L’Envoi” 5). Specifically, in *Modern Painters II*, Ruskin had memorably denounced what he saw as the excessive focus on sensuousness in the growing nineteenth-century theoretical reflection on beauty – aesthetics.¹ The “Aesthetic,” he claimed, was “a mere operation of sense,” and the arts that appealed to it “s[a]nk into a mere amusement, ministers to morbid sensibilities, ticklers and fanners of the soul’s sleep” (4.35-6). As opposed to the “Aesthetic,” with its sensuous snares, Ruskin posited the “Theoretic” faculty that enabled the “moral perception and appreciation of ideas of beauty” (4.35-6).

¹ We have already seen Ruskin’s similar denunciation of “worldliness” and “love of art, of luxury” that he identified in the Renaissance, in chapter 2 on Robert Browning.

The meaning and value of art thus lay not in its pleasing sensuousness but in its ability to enable moral perception, that is, the perception of things as they are: “To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion,—all in one” (4.333). Langtry does not record if Wilde had any response, but we can find his attitude in his critical dialogue “The Decay of Lying.” One of Wilde’s monologists, Vivian, argues that “No great artist ever sees things as they really are”: art, far from enabling the perception of the world as it is, shapes the very sense of reality that is apprehended and experienced by the spectator. Accordingly, the Japanese people are “simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art” that is “the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists,” and one can get the “absolutely Japanese effect” not by visiting Japan, but by steeping oneself in Japanese art, and then strolling down Piccadilly. Wilde’s daring valorization of the artifice of art set a pattern that still largely governs the reception of both authors, and, more broadly, the perceived opposition of the ‘movements’ with which they are identified. For as Ruskin was, and remains, the acknowledged prophet of realism in art, with his insistence on equating the meaning and value of art with truthful perception, so Wilde is the apostle of Aestheticism, proclaiming not so much the autonomy of art (in the sense of art as being separate from life) as its sovereignty: art creates the contours and content of life itself, which thus comes into being as an aesthetic phenomenon, an artistic effect.

And yet in Wilde’s reverence towards Ruskin we can read a richer, more complicated view of their intellectual relationship than one of opposition. Wilde’s reverence is not merely the respect of a former student to his former professor,² but the

² Ruskin was famously one of Wilde’s professors at Oxford. On his arrival at Oxford, Wilde specifically sought out Ruskin (along with Pater), even rising uncharacteristically early in order to participate in Ruskin’s road project.

homage due to an intellectual ancestor, even if this homage find articulation in subversion. For Wilde's views on the glorious artificiality of art are descended from Ruskin's realism, and realize the implicit contradictions of that realism. In the opening chapter, we saw how Ruskin's strenuous pursuit of objectivity is born of his attempts to regulate and suppress his intense sense of self – which is nevertheless reflected in the seemingly objective details that Ruskin perceptually 'carved' in Gothic architecture. Wilde's insistence on the artificiality of art, which produces the effect of objective reality, makes explicit the suppressed subjective tendencies that produce Ruskin's reach to objectivity. This complex line of descent comes across in the apostrophizing of Ruskin of another of Wilde's monolinguists, Gilbert, in "The Critic as Artist I":

Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter? That mighty and majestic prose of his, so fervid and so fiery-coloured in its noble eloquence, so rich in its elaborate symphonic music, so sure and certain, at its best, in subtle choice of word and epithet, is at least as great a work of art as any of those wonderful sunsets that bleach or rot on their corrupted canvases in England's Gallery (238).

Wilde's Vivian conducts a breathless turnaround of the form as well as the content of Ruskinian realism, when he recasts Ruskin's impassioned and conscientious defense of the fidelity of Turner's portrayals of nature as an autonomous and supremely expressive work of art, regardless of its truth-value. In keeping with the title of the dialogue, Vivian credits Ruskin – and "aesthetic critics" in general – as artist-critics that take art for the raw material for their creative criticism. This is not a betrayal of Ruskinian realism, but is at once a subversion and a consummation of the contradictory aesthetic tendencies that

characterize Ruskin's defense of Turner. Notably, Wilde's Vivian does not rhapsodize about Ruskin's descriptions of the concrete details of Gothic architecture, but about Ruskin's descriptions of Turner's atmospheric paintings, where form and boundary shade into imperceptible melting gradations. Vivian's own evocation of Ruskin's "fiery-colored" prose brings to mind Ruskin's impassioned defense of Turner's *Slave-Ship*:

Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty ship as it labours amidst the lightening of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, and, cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea (3.571)

The shifting subjects of the above sentence trace Ruskin's shift of focus from the sea-waves to the ship and their masts to the skies above. Each transition is described in terms of melting shades of color, realized above all in the way the red hue of the sky "mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight" and "incarnadines the multitudinous sea." For Ruskin, these melting nuances that were lambasted by critics for their inaccuracy, are key to Turner's fidelity to nature: "[The painting's] daring conception, ideal in the highest sense of the word, is based on the purest truth, and wrought out with the concentrated knowledge of a life; its colour is absolutely perfect, not one false or morbid hue in any part or line, and so modulated that every square inch of canvas is a perfect composition" (3.572). In defining Turner's melting atmospheres in terms of artistic fidelity, Ruskin creates an argumentative correlative for his own self-suppressing, self-intensifying drive

towards objectivity. Yet Ruskin's fascinated, impassioned voice comes through in his virtuosic description of virtuosic merging of color, bringing to mind the passionate, almost Dionysiac dissolution of self in the shifting play of color that he described in such passionate terms in *Modern Painters I*, despite designating color as a "secondary quality" (3.159). It is this letting go of the self that is latched on to by Vivian, and made into the basis of his pronouncement that "the difference between objective and subjective work is one of external form... All artistic creation is absolutely subjective" (258). The subjectivity of creation comes across above all in seemingly objective works – "the more objective a creation appears to be, the more subjective it really is" (259) – so that the critic, with his self-suppressing emphasis on objective form, is more of an artist than the artist he examines. As Turner takes nature for his subject, so Ruskin takes Turner's art for his own subjective creation, in which his self dissolves and becomes diffused in the melting details he describes. And Wilde's Vivian joins in the process, taking Ruskin's melting details as the subject for his own subjective (self-)revelation, and making them into the basis of his theory of artistic activity and aesthetic criticism.

In this chapter, I conclude the alignment between detail and subjectivity I have been tracing throughout this dissertation by opening it up, through an examination of the dissolving and diffusive representations of detail in the Aesthetic works of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. The works of both authors are notable for the lack of the excess material detail usually associated with realism – the excision of which is a key principle of their Aesthetic philosophy, as we shall see. However, I argue that far from representing the containment or excision of detail from the representation order, the selectivity of both authors actually realizes the principle at the core of detail: the

unreconciled relationship of matter and spirit, form and content, which irreconciliation now paradoxically forms the foundation of their Aesthetic ideals. Instead of the material details of realism, which threaten the wholes they comprise, details in Pater's and Wilde's works take the form of dissolving nuances of color, light, and shade, which evoke ineffable, irresistible, and amoral moods and sensations. In calling these details "dissolute," I wish to convey their dissolving form, which dissipates the semblance of boundaries and divisions, as well as the broader dissolution of moral boundaries and social hierarchies their authors enact through them (both "dissolute" and "dissolve" are derived from the Latin *dissolvere* – to loosen). The details of Aestheticism constantly melt and merge into the wholes they comprise; in taking over the whole, they consummate the movement of details from the periphery to the center of representation.

This consummation has key implications for the constitution of subjectivity. Where the concrete details of realism are the result of a subjectivity that constituted itself in its reach for objectivity, the melting details of Aestheticism enact the dissolution of the subject/object divide. Aesthetic details give shifting form to a subjectivity which inheres in the fleeting relationship between subject and object, both of which identities are in constant flux. These dissolute details paradoxically become the basis of the precise, disciplined, yet extravagant ideal of literary style that Pater and Wilde cherish as the impress of subjectivity.

Pater's Stylistic Details: The Self as World as Representation

Wilde's argument that the dissolving details of Ruskin's prose are created by, and reveal, the creative subjectivity of Ruskin himself, has a key precedent in the 'aesthetic criticism' of Wilde's chief influence, Walter Pater. In fact, Walter Pater has long been

associated with John Ruskin: Kenneth Daley argues that they are “two of the first aesthetic philosophers in England to theorize ‘romanticism’” (4). Traditionally, their relationship has been viewed through the afore-mentioned antithesis of realism and Aestheticism: Daley views Pater’s “defense of romantic passion” as “deliberately opposed” to Ruskin’s “conservative” Romantic emphasis on the truth of nature. However, Caroline Levine has traced how Pater’s apparent egotism and relativism, far from revising Ruskin, push to the limits the epistemic (self-)interrogations that are already at the core of Ruskin’s realism. Drawing on these recent approaches, in this section I examine how Pater’s dissolving detail images his dissolving ideal of subjectivity – an associated, I argue, that is descended from Ruskin himself.

For both Ruskin and Pater, the perception of objective fact is key to the constitution of subjectivity. In the opening chapter of this dissertation, we examined Ruskin’s poignant admission of the “cost of truth” in his preface to *The Stones of Venice II*, where his scrupulous attempts to observe and render Gothic architectural details are informed by his awareness of the ultimate impossibility of his task:

“[I]t is not easy to be accurate in an account of anything, however simple.

Zoologists often disagree in their descriptions of the curve of a shell, or the plumage of a bird, though they may lay their specimen on the table, and examine it at their leisure; how much greater becomes the likelihood of error in the description of things which must be in many parts observed from a distance... I believe few people have any idea of the cost of truth in the things... of the strange way in which separate observations will sometimes falsify each other, incapable of reconciliation, owing to some imperceptible inadvertency... I am ashamed of

the number of times in which I have had to say, in the following pages, ‘I am not sure’ (10.5).

Ruskin’s response to the inevitable “imperceptible inadvertency” that thwarts all attempts at objective observation and description is to employ that uncertainty as a spur to ever greater efforts at objectivity, even while recognizing the elusiveness of complete objectivity: the subjectivity of perception, once acknowledged, is covered by the appearance of objectivity it generates. Writing thirty-six years later in his essay “Style,” however, Walter Pater explicitly acknowledges the blurred divide between objective fact and subjective perception from the outset, and takes it as the basis of his aesthetic analysis. Beginning with the premise that “[t]he line between fact and something quite different from external fact is, indeed, hard to draw,” he claims that in “persuasive writers” the factual argument often shades into “a pleading — a theorem no longer, but essentially an appeal to the reader to catch the writer’s spirit, to think with him” (“Style” 4-5). While Pater’s example of a “persuasive writer” here is the seventeenth-century mathematician, physicist, and religious philosopher Blaise Pascal – a figure whose interdisciplinary³ endeavors embody the interrogation of factual and expressive, or scientific and literary, modes and genres – his identification of “pleading” can also apply to Ruskin’s moving admission of the “cost of truth,” which is ironically aimed at eliciting the reader’s trust in the Gothic details Ruskin attempts to render.

Instead of seeking to suppress subjectivity with the appearance of objective facts, as Ruskin does, Pater expands the recognition of subjectivity into an argument about the

³ While the word “interdisciplinary” is an anachronism, its use here is intended to interrogate the divide between ‘scientific’ and ‘artistic’ modes of enquiry that grew from the nineteenth-century onwards. I pursue the generic implications of this divide in my second chapter, where I explore Browning’s combination of ‘prosaic’ and ‘poetic’ themes and techniques in ways that casts their division in question.

aesthetic value of seemingly factual, and thus unaesthetic, prose genres. In the above scenario, he claims that the writer's representation of "fact" is "an expression no longer of fact but of [the writer's] sense of it" (5). This "sense of fact" is present even in scientific treatises and historical works –in particular in the latter, where a historian such as Michelet, Livy, or Tacitus is confronted with a "multitude of facts" from which he "must need select, and in selecting assert something of his own humour, something that comes not of the world without but of a vision within" (5). Pater does not view this inevitable, subjective selectivity as a loss of objectivity, but as a gain in beauty. The discriminating selection and representation of fact, however inadvertent, in keeping with an inner vision, becomes the basis of beauty: "each [historian], after his own sense, modifies – who can tell where and to what degree? — and becomes something else than a transcriber; each, as he thus modifies, passing into the domain of art proper" (5-6).

Pater's identification – and celebration – of artistic creativity, especially in genres associated with scientific and logical thought, contrasts with Ruskin's insistence on objectivity, even though they both proceed from similar recognitions of subjectivity. While Ruskin seeks to submerge his awareness of subjectivity in a vision of objective details, Pater expands his recognition of subjectivity into a new identity: the prose artist. In the process, he reconceives the 'prosaic' function of the prose writer – the transcription of fact – as artistry, for the writer does not merely transcribe fact, but his sense of it: "For just in proportion as the writer's aim, consciously or unconsciously, comes to be the transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact, but of his sense of it, he becomes an artist, his work fine art; and good art... in proportion to the truth of his presentment of that sense" (6).

While there is scope for artistic expression even in scientific and philosophical prose, Pater locates the highest artistry in “imaginative prose,” which he views as “the special and opportune art of the modern world” (7). Prose is particularly suited to represent the chaotic and fleeting nature of modern life, for it covers a “chaotic variety and complexity of... interests” (7). In addition, Pater views prose as possessing “an all-pervading naturalism, a curiosity about everything whatever as it really is,” owing to its traditional association of modern, ‘factual’ modes of scientific and logical enquiry – even as he reconceives the naturalist transcription of fact as the high artistic expression of an inner sense of fact. Thus, Pater views “imaginative prose” as reconciling the literary expression of inner life with the naturalist fidelity to the variegated modern world: it is a “transcript, not of mere fact, but of fact in its infinite variety, as modified by human preference in all its infinitely varied forms” (7). In the hands of the prose artist, imaginative prose can take on qualities usually reserved for the literary form of language – poetry: “Its [prose’s] beauties will be not exclusively ‘pedestrian’: it will exert, in due measure, all the varied charms of poetry, down to the rhythm which, as in Cicero, or Michelet, or Newman, at their best, gives its musical value to every syllable” (8). The prose artist will combine poetic, expressive qualities with ‘prosaic’ formal diffuseness and broad thematic scope to create “an instrument of many stops, meditative, observant, descriptive, eloquent, analytic, plaintive, fervid” (8). “Imaginative prose” becomes a truly modern art form, “the special and privileged artistic faculty of the present day” (7).

Pater’s reconception of prose as the characteristic art of modernity – endowed with, and even surpassing, the qualities of literary expression usually associated with poetry – bridges a key chasm in nineteenth-century aesthetic hierarchies. This chasm is

encapsulated in the divide between prose and poetry, which finds its most comprehensive and influential articulation (as we saw in the second chapter on Robert Browning) in the *Aesthetics* of G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel identifies prose – the unversified and unvarnished texts in which he viewed scientific and logical treatises to be written – with the quotidian and rigidly-regimented finitude of modern life. He excludes prose from the domain of art, viewing it in opposition to the linguistic art of poetry; being characteristic of the scientific, bureaucratic and analytical professions that regulated everyday life, prose lacks the capacity of subjective liveliness and virtuosity of figurative language, which he considers to be the sole domain of poetry: “a general rule for prose [is] literal accuracy, unmistakable definiteness, and clear intelligibility, while what is metaphorical and figurative is always relatively unclear and inaccurate” (I.372). As Franco Moretti explains, this is an idea of “prose as work, and, more precisely, as work of analysis” (382). In the second chapter of this dissertation, we examined Robert Browning’s interrogation of this divide through his use of ‘prosaic’ themes and techniques in his dramatic monologues. Pater’s interrogation proceeds in a different direction: instead of rendering poetry prosaic, as Wilde viewed Browning as doing, Pater renders prose poetic, or capable of the formal beauty and inner expressivity identified with poetry. Behind Pater’s poeticization of prose, however, lies a deeper engagement with nineteenth-century aesthetic philosophy.

Pater’s poeticization of prose consummates the breakdown of representational hierarchies that is at the core of nineteenth-century aesthetic philosophy, and indeed, of aesthetics itself as a modern discipline. (We have already examined the emergence of aesthetics in the introduction and the previous chapters; I recapitulate it here to illuminate

the implications of Pater's poeticization of prose.) Jacques Rancière traces the emergence of aesthetics, as a discipline about art as an autonomous realm of experience, to the breakdown of the classical representational order, which comprised a divide between specific "fine arts," symmetrical forms that were viewed as the province of artists or free "men of leisure," and the mechanical work of unthinking artisans. From the late eighteenth-century onwards, however, this classical order began to break down under what Rancière terms "the aesthetic regime of art": material conditions and modes of perception that disrupted and reconfigured the representational order to include previously excluded forms that did not adhere to classical ideals of symmetry and harmony, but now came to be associated with the idea of artistic creation precisely because of their non-adherence, which became identified with free artistic expression and originality (*Aisthesis* xii). It is to this "aesthetic regime" that we owe the idea of "art" as a singular and autonomous realm of sensible experience and affective response that came to displace specific fine arts: as Rancière writes, "Art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it" (x). Hegel's *Aesthetics* represents a key stage in this "aesthetic regime of art," for he forges a memorably double-faced aesthetic philosophy built on the breakdown of the older representational order. On the one hand, he creates a formulation of art based on symmetry and harmony; on the other hand, he explores how art might encompass asymmetrical or fleeting modern forms, such as modern literature and genre painting, thereby paving the way for the aestheticization of even those genres that he excludes from his aesthetics: such as prose.

Hegel views prose – and modernity in general – as antithetical to the idea of 'art,' which he defines as the sensuous manifestation of the perfect reconciliation of the spirit

or subject and the object in the “Idea.” The epitome of “art” as formal beauty is “Ideal” or Classical art – namely, Greek sculpture, which exemplifies the adequation of form and content, with the beauty and harmony of Greek gods giving sensuous form to the perfect embodiment of the spirit in matter. However, as we have seen in the previous chapters, Classical art, for all its formal perfection, represents the spirit frozen in sensuous embodiment, and is thus inadequate to represent the increasingly self-conscious and analytic nature of modern spirit (2.710-11). The condition of subjective self-consciousness that is central to modernity requires the *dissolution* of this perfect reconciliation of form and content, which Hegel locates in the arts of the “Romantic” or modern era, such as literature, music, and genre painting. Though founded on the lack of fit between form and content, these “Romantic” arts, however, can yet be endowed with the *appearance* of the perfect harmony that is the province of “Ideal” art, through the artist’s subjective virtuosity. As we saw in the chapter on Robert Browning, Romantic “virtuosity” becomes the impress of the subjectivity of the artist, who creates juxtapositions of form and content with such skill as to make them appear self-evident, as they would in “Ideal” art. Virtuosity takes the form of technical skill in Dutch genre painting (more on painterly virtuosity shortly with reference to Pater’s essay on Botticelli), and the use of figurative language in poetry. At this point, Hegel views only poetry as capable of aesthetic and literary expression; prose, as we saw above, is the characteristic genre of unaesthetic modernity. Yet his elevation of modern poetry as a modern art form, in opposition to prose, is itself the result of a breakdown in aesthetic hierarchies, that prepares the philosophical ground for Pater’s poeticization and aestheticization of prose.

When Pater claims that prose can take on the “charms” of poetry, he endows prose with the ideality – the perfectly adequate relationship between form and content – that Hegel identifies as the essence of “Ideal” or Classical art. It is important, however, to recognize the difference between Pater’s idealization of prose, and Hegel’s argument of “Romantic” virtuosity: Pater forges a more intimate relationship between prose and idealism than Hegel does between poetry and ideality. For Hegel, virtuosity only endows poetry (and genre painting) with the *appearance* of ideal perfection, not the real thing, for there is no inherent connection between the representation of nature in poetry, and the free human spirit. Instead of true formal beauty, virtuosity creates “liveliness” – a looser and more dynamic fit between form and content, matter and spirit, than in beauty (we have already seen this in the second chapter, on Robert Browning). However, Pater views imaginative prose in terms of the formal beauty of “Ideal” art – that is, the perfect correspondence of form and content, of meaning and expression.

This perfect adequation of form and content, which was originally the basis of Hegel’s “Ideal” art of Classical Greek sculpture, is now transposed into the core of Pater’s conception of “style” in literature, and in prose literature above all. In the process, Pater tries to endow the (in Hegelian aesthetics) unreconciled genre of modern literature with the perfect correspondence of form and content, image and meaning, that was the prerogative of Classical art. The essence of style for Pater resides in the conscious and careful choice of the one right word (or phrase, or sentence) to express the thought: “To give the phrase, the sentence, the structural member, the entire composition, song, or essay, a similar unity with its subject and with itself: — style is in the right way when it tends towards that” (19). For Pater, the relationship between the word and the artist’s

meaning is that of direct correspondence, not the indirect reflection of the artist's self that characterizes Romantic virtuosity.

Pater compares his ideal of direct correspondence to two very different forms of art that are usually viewed in opposition: classical sculpture and music. His comparison of the perfect correspondence at the heart of literary style to music is well known: in music "it is impossible to distinguish the form from the substance or matter, the subject from the expression," so that music becomes the ideal of all art, and literature approaches this ideal "by finding its specific excellence in the absolute correspondence of the term to its import" (35). But Pater's comparison of literary style to classical Greek sculpture is no less revealing. In characterizing language – the "material" of the prose artist – as "no more a creation of his own than the sculptor's marble" (9), Pater differs from Hegel's view of language as a creation of the spirit. For Pater, language is the "[p]roduct of a myriad various minds and contending tongues, compact of obscure and minute association... [with] its own abundant and often recondite laws" (9). The notion that language is an alien and sensuous medium that has its own laws to be followed, leads to the idea that there is a "right" fit or form that the prose artist must find in order to express his meaning. In other words, literary style is not like the arbitrary juxtapositions of "Romantic" art, but a matter of the right fit between form and content, exemplified in the way the idealized human body of the Greek god embodies the spirit. Thus, style becomes more than the mere subjective preference of the writer – it becomes an ideal:

A relegation, you may say perhaps—style to the subjectivity, the mere caprice, of the of individual, which must soon transform it into mannerism. Not so since there is, under the conditions supposed, for those elements of the man, for every

lineament of the vision within, the one word, the one acceptable word, recognisable by the sensitive, by others "who have intelligence" in the matter, as absolutely as ever anything can be in the evanescent and delicate region of human language. The style, the manner, would be the man, not in his unreasoned and really uncharacteristic caprices, involuntary or affected, but in absolutely sincere apprehension of what is most real to him (34).

Pater outlines a paradoxical concept of style, as an ideal that is based on the "right" correspondence between word and meaning, and is recognized by a select "sensitive" group of those who "have the intelligence," but that is nevertheless inevitably found in different permutations, in the works of different individual writers. This paradox encapsulates in practical terms his attempt to create an artistic ideal of formal beauty and perfection that takes for its foundation the variegated and diffuse genre of modern literary prose. In philosophical terms, this paradox is embodied in the afore-mentioned juxtaposition of two very different art forms – Classical sculpture and the "Romantic" art of music. Pater juxtaposes these forms, and their essentially opposed philosophical categories, to create a contradictory hybrid, a kind of "Romantic" classicism, which takes for its ideal the variegated and fleeting nature of modern life.

The paradoxes of Pater's "Romantic" classicism are encapsulated in its foundation stylistic unit: the detail. For Pater, the "right" style is very much a matter of the judicious selection – and even more so, of the omission – of elements of style, in keeping with the author's sense. Quoting Schiller's claim that "[t]he artist may be known rather by what he *omits*," Pater argues for the importance of omission in literary style: "in literature, too, the true artist may be best recognized by his tact of omission" (15). The

key arena in which the prose artist's faculty of omission plays out is that of detail and its associated categories: the minor, the subsidiary, and the ornamental: "above all, there will be no uncharacteristic or tarnished or vulgar decoration, permissible ornament being for the most part structural, or necessary" (15). Pater's adoption of architectural language to distinguish between "permissible" ornament that is essential to the "structur[e]" of the literary work, and inessential ornament, subverts the centrality of ornamental details in Ruskin's Gothic. Where Ruskin viewed the proliferation of details, in defiance of the external symmetries and harmonies of neoclassicism, as expressing the free subjectivity of the Gothic artisan, Pater equates the stylistic impress of the artist with the selection – and even more so, the *omission* of detail – in keeping with his pursuit of the ideal perfection of the Classical art that Ruskin denigrated. In an injunction worthy of the sternest anti-detail strictures of eighteenth-century neoclassicists such as Joshua Reynolds and Lord Kames, Pater cautions against the "narcotic force" that unwarranted ornamental elements exercise upon the attention of susceptible readers: "Parallel, allusion, the allusive way generally, the flowers in the garden :— [the writer] knows the narcotic force of these upon the negligent intelligence to which any *diversion*, literally, is welcome, any vagrant intruder, because one can go wandering away with it from the immediate subject" (16). Such pronouncements create the impression that nineteenth-century aesthetics has come full circle, with the Aesthetic pursuit of ideal form recreating the neoclassical denigration of details that was contested by realists such as Ruskin in their pursuit of fidelity to nature.

Yet the apparent opposition between Aesthetic and realist approaches obscures the extent to which Aesthetic selectivity is indebted to the disruption of representational

hierarchies under the realist embrace of details. If Aesthetic writers such as Pater can look to the selection and omission of prose details to realize their ideal of style and beauty, it is because details have taken over the representational order, thanks to its insistent inclusion by realists such as Ruskin, following in the trail of Romantic forbears such as Hazlitt and Wordsworth. Pater's very insistence on the inclusion of "permissible" ornament, which he views as being essential to the structure of the literary edifice, even as he seeks to limit "surplus" ornament, reveals how far details have traveled as an aesthetic category – from the margins of representation to its center, becoming part of the basic edifice of the literary work of art. In this context, Pater's ideal(ist) conception of prose style signifies not so much a rejection of details as their *triumph*, for it consummates the key aesthetic principle that details signify: the inadequate relationship between form and content, formally manifested as disruption of aesthetic form by parts that do not cohere into the whole, but that are now reconceived as the medium and mode for the attainment of artistic perfection.

In taking prose details as the basis of his style – that is, in founding his ideal upon the entities that embody the antithesis of idealism in aesthetic thought – Pater creates a contradiction that informs the relationship between style and subjectivity. We recall in our previous discussions of Hegel's philosophy how details are the by-product, as it were, of the inadequation of form and content: they do not directly embody the artist's conscious meaning. Instead, they are born of a modern subjectivity that is too advanced to find adequate embodiment in sensuous matter, and that thus generates minutely detailed representations of external nature, the very arbitrariness of which manifests its freedom. However, Pater reverses this relationship, viewing details as the result of the

artist's choice, his conscious representation of an inner mental state and significance.

Style becomes a means of asserting the artist's mastery and control over fundamentally resistant details.

Pater's paradoxical idealization of prose details shapes his analysis of his exemplary prose stylist: Gustave Flaubert. Pater views Flaubert as a "true artist" of prose, possessing a superb faculty of discernment, as manifested in the selection of relevant detail and the omission of irrelevant detail: "He will remember that, as the very word ornament indicates what is in itself non-essential, so the 'one beauty' of all literary style is of its very essence, and independent, in prose and verse alike, of all removable decoration; that it may exist in its fullest lustre, as in... *Madame Bovary*" (15). In Flaubert's style, he finds the embodiment of the "philosophic idea" of the right fit between word and meaning, form and content – "some pre-existent adaptation, between a relative, somewhere in the world of thought and its correlative, somewhere in the world of language" (27). Flaubert's style epitomizes the belief in, and search for, *le mot juste*: "[t]he one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words... the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within" (27). Yet this search is characterized by monumental struggles against great – and perhaps insurmountable – impediments. Even as he believes in the right word for the right thought, Flaubert confesses his difficulty in finding this perfect correspondence:

You talk of my serenity, and envy me. It may well surprise you. Sick, irritated, the prey a thousand times a day of cruel pain, I continue my labour like a true working-man, who, with sleeves turned up, in the sweat of his brow, beats away

at his anvil, never troubling himself whether it rains or blows, for hail or thunder
(26).

Flaubert recasts the seemingly dainty and tactful work of selecting the right ornament, the right word, as the rough and relentless manual labor of a “true working-man” – a description that recalls the subordination of details (and associated prose genres) in the classical representational order. Finding the right word is not the delicate surgical mission of an artist, but the arduous labor of a “working-man,” not only because details resist being abstracted into an ideal of style, but also because the basis of any such abstraction – an essential relationship between image and meaning – does not exist.

Indeed, the gap between aspiration and reality is illustrated by the reception of *Madame Bovary*. By his own admission, Flaubert set out to create a masterpiece of style about nothing. This very ambition, this indifference to subject matter, is shaped by the aesthetic principle behind detail: the disruption of aesthetic hierarchies that assign some subjects importance above others (Rancière 2009). This democracy is further evident in the subject Flaubert chooses – a superbly rendered story of the sordid adulteries and suicide of a provincial doctor’s wife – which shows how far the prose of the world has come: it is possible to aspire to an ideal representation of the sordid world of prose, in the medium of prose. (This apotheosis of prose is evident in Pater’s own elevation of prose to a “fine art”.) Thus, he seeks to create a paradoxical virtuosic representation of sordid everyday life, a triumph of style. And yet several critics denounced *Madame Bovary*, not so much for its disregard for morality, but also for its disregard of style. The conservative critic Barbey d’Aurevilly, censured Flaubert’s “infinite, eternal, atomistic, blinding” practice of description:

[T]here is no book there... [no]work of art constituted by a book with an organized development (...) He goes without a plan, pushing ahead, without a preconceived overview, not being aware that life, under the diversity and the apparent disorder of its vagaries, has its logical and inflexible laws (...) it is a loitering among the insignificant, the vulgar and the abject for the sole pleasure of the walking (Rancière 2009).

D'Aurevilly perceptively zeroes in on the fundamental principle behind's Flaubert's virtuosity: the collapse of the "classical logic of representation," based on the subordination of insignificant descriptive details of everyday life to significant events and actions (see Rancière 2009). But what is striking is how similar D'Aurevilly's criticism is to Flaubert's own figuration of his stylistic struggles in terms of working-class labor. The elegant intellectual quest for *le mot juste* can easily shade into the crude labor of the working-man, made more pitiable in its inevitable failure.

Flaubert's avowed struggles to reach for the unattainable perfect fit of form and content has key repercussions for Pater's conception of the relation between style and the artist's subjectivity. Crucially, they lead Pater to create a split between the "mind in style" and the "soul in style" (23). The "mind" in style epitomizes the ideal fit of form and content that is created by a conscious mind in control of the overall "literary architecture" of the artwork. It is no coincidence that this phrase is reminiscent of Ruskin, for the mind's style creates the literary equivalent of the ideal Gothic building that Ruskin describes, a "stately and unaccusable whole" that comprises individual variegated fragments (10.190). Accordingly, the "mind in style" creates a "rich and expressive" "literary architecture" where "many irregularities, surprises, and afterthoughts; the

contingent as well as the necessary [are] subsumed under the unity of the whole” (“Style” 20). This formal unity manifests the unity of mind’s inner vision, an integrated “architectural conception of work, which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it, and where in every part is conscious of all the rest” (18). Thus, the “mind in style” is an organic fantasy of the perfect correspondence of form and content, where every part fits into the artistic whole, and the whole expresses completely the coherent inner vision of the artist.

More ambiguous in terms of fit is the “soul in style,” which is manifested as a subtler and more diffuse correspondence between the writer’s “peculiar spirit” and the medium of language. the writer does not consciously select his words to express unified meaning, but “absorb[s] language... into the peculiar spirit [he is] of,” so that the resulting artwork appears to be a result of “some inexplicable inspiration” (22). Where the “mind” in style effects “static and objective indications of design,” manifested in discrete and distinct literary elements, the “soul” in style creates subtle effects that “suggest what can never be uttered” (17). In this sense, the “soul” in style is closer to Hegel’s “Romantic” conception of art, where form is inadequate to express the inner subjective content: what actually gets said is “only one phase or facet” of the unspoken inner sense of the soul. Pater cites Blake as an instance of the “soul in style,” but it is also possible to view Ruskin’s visionary descriptions of the melting gradations of color in Turner’s paintings as another instance.

The distinction between the “mind” and the “soul” in style, however, is not absolute. The figure of Flaubert can be viewed as continuing elements of both: even as he seems to epitomize *le mot juste*, the perfect word selected to express the coherent

meaning, his stylistic struggles also align him with the “soul”; Pater himself views Flaubert as a “martyr of literary style,” a visionary artist whose conceptions threaten to escape the perfect formal fit he seeks and occasionally finds. Flaubert’s success as well as his struggles reveal that the distinction between the “mind” and the “soul” in style is a matter of degree. In other words, “mind” and “soul” are different aspects of the same mode of subjectivity, with the elusiveness of the “soul” enacting in inner terms the “ascesis” or stylistic self-restraint that is the essence of the “mind.”

By virtue of its elusiveness, the “soul” in style has attracted, and baffled, critics who have sought in it a key to Pater’s own famously subtle and diffuse stylistic soul. Jacques Khalip reads the uncertain and capricious stylistic expressiveness of “soul” in terms of a “ghostly” and “unknowable” indeterminacy that paradoxically marks the soul at its most meaningful and imaginative: “Art and life... share an intrinsic insubstantiality... they are at their most meaningful when they appear undetermined” (138). According to Khalip, the stylistic self-restraint of the soul, and its elusiveness, even resistance, to expression, marks the “sadness” of the Paterian critical persona. In response to a world hostile to its homosexuality as well as its fineness of perception, the Paterian persona withdraws and evacuates itself, resulting in what Khalip terms a “relieving vacuity” of self (Khalip 139). Khalip’s reading of emptiness and withdrawal is certainly warranted to an extent: in his earliest published essay “*Diaphaneité*” (1864), Pater describes such an “unworldly” and crystalline mode of subjectivity comprises fine nuances too subtle to be apprehended by the world, this self paradoxically asserts itself in its yearning towards transparency, a state of “perfection [where] the veil of an outer life not simply expressive of the inward becomes thinner and thinner.” Khalip views this

diaphanous character as supremely featureless and empty, a “a figure beyond figuration” that is “most himself when he is not himself” (148). What Khalip does not note, however, is that this supposed featureless transparency is on the other side of a highly sensuous subjectivity that expresses itself through the generation of figures – both figures of speech and of personae – that illuminate different aspects of its exploration of history. Writing of Plato, Pater claims that his austerity of style is “attained only by the chastisement, the control, of a variously interested, a richly sensuous nature,” which nature is instead diffused among the highly detailed personae of the speakers of his dialogues (*Plato and Platonism* 180). His characterization – or rather, figuration – of Plato may well be applied to himself: like Plato, Pater’s own self is present precisely where he seems least present – that is, imperceptibly diffused among the figures of his writing.

It is in this sense that we can approach the figures – the aestheticized representations of historical personae, as well as the richly figurative language in which they are represented – that Pater creates to embody his sense of the Renaissance. (While I will examine the historical figures of Pater’s writing later in this section, I wish to focus here on the experiential processes at the core of Pater’s figurative strategies – which processes are themselves rendered in highly figurative terms.) My focus on Pater’s “sense” of the Renaissance is in keeping with his famous revision of the Arnoldian understanding of the function of criticism – “To see the object as in itself it really is” – in keeping with his own preoccupation with subjective perception: “in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly... What is this song or picture, this

engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me?*” (xix-xx). Critics have recently challenged the identification of Pater’s revision with “self-indulgent subjectivism” (Kaiser 54).⁴ Carolyn Williams argues that Pater’s commitment to objectivity is at once skeptical and sincere: “Pater’s aesthetic historicism is in the mainstream of the Victorian reaction against romanticism and the consequent attempt to reconstruct a sense of objectivity” (3). Williams perceptively identifies a mutually reinforcing yet interrogative relationship between Pater’s aestheticism and his historicism, which shapes his sincere reach towards objectivity – a sense of the external object in all its “unique particularity” and its situations in its historical context – while remaining aware of the subjectivity of perception and the irrecoverable nature of the past.⁵ However, the contradictions underlying Pater’s dialectic of aestheticism and historicism complicate the overall drive towards objectivity and historicity that Williams identifies. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the very drive towards objectivity and historicity in the nineteenth century is inseparable from the growing awareness of subjectivity as a distorting force to be suppressed, and empirical practices aimed at cultivating objectivity – such as the observation of details – paradoxically create and intensify the self they are intended to suppress (Galison and Daston 204).

⁴ For a view of Pater as a founder of modern “subjectivistic” criticism, see Hillis Miller 1976: “Subjectivity – the self – is, it seems, the beginning, the end, and the persisting basis in all Pater’s writings” (100).

⁵ Williams writes, “[b]oth [aestheticism and historicism] begin in skepticism, questioning the very possibility of knowledge, and both turn that epistemological doubt against itself in a dialectical revision of the grounds of knowledge” (3). Even as Pater’s historicism seeks to situate the object of knowledge in its historical context, it is informed by a skepticism regarding the possibility of historical knowledge; similarly, while Pater is aware that “the simplest act of perception is an aesthetic act,” with “history itself [being] in part the result of an aesthetic reconstruction,” he employs his aestheticism in a sincere attempt to reach out to reach out to the external object in history (3). While Williams views these contradictory moves as nevertheless enabling an overall reach towards objectivity, I claim that the very reach towards objectivity is a result of subjectivity – which dialectic plays out in, among other places, the irresolvable contradictory interplay of Paterian aestheticism and historicism.

Subjectivity and objectivity are dissolved through Pater's historical objects and figures: even as they are material and historical entities in what appears to be a work of history, they are represented by the narrator in terms of the experiences they create in his mind, which experiences he transmits to us through his gorgeous and highly figurative prose. The narrator's detailing (from *détailler* – to carve) of the objects makes the reader aware that their apparent particularity is generated by the narrator's intensely creative subjectivity. At the same time, like the objects themselves, this subjectivity is itself diffused in the experiences the objects are represented as arousing. The reader eventually realizes that he or she is eventually in the mind of the narrator, which imperceptibly shades into the world he describes. This process is made explicit in the melting form of details, for they are not discrete entities, but forms of the very flow of experience.

This interplay of subjectivity and objectivity in the *Renaissance* is established in Pater's "Conclusion," which is one of the earliest of the *Renaissance* essays, being originally published in 1868 as part of Pater's review essay "Poems by William Morris." Beginning with a passionate experiential analysis of how external objects, on close examination, dissolve into a flux of impressions, Pater continues to show how this flux constitutes and reconstitutes subjectivity itself. In this, Pater's "Conclusion" is neither the "impassioned statement of his belief in relativism, subjectivism, nihilism, and hedonism" (Williams 12) that it is traditionally taken to be, nor is it the alternate epistemology – that Williams identifies. Instead, subjectivity inheres in the mutually constitutive and dissolving flow between subject and object.

Pater famously begins with its description of the extreme relativism of modern thought – "to regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions"

(186) - even as he traces this relativism back to the idea of the Heraclitean flux in his chosen epigraph from Plato's *Cratylus*: "Heraclitus somewhere says that all things are moving along and that nothing stands still" (Williams 33). His choice of epigraph not only complicates the supposed modernity of relativism, but also historicizes relativism – or relativizes history – so that history becomes a *mis-en-abyme* of infinitely refracted sources: as Carolyn Williams points out, this epigraph of Plato is recounted by Socrates (as voiced by Plato), who is himself recounting the words of Heraclites, from an unremembered and therefore irrecoverable source. Indeed, Pater would later expand on the obscure historicity of thought in *Plato and Platonism*, which opens with the argument that even the most abstract theories emerge from earlier anticipations in the minds of preceding thinkers: a "powerful generalisation thrown into some salient phrase," such as Heraclitus's "all things fleet away" has roots "somewhere among the natural though but half-developed instincts of the human mind itself" (1). In the "Conclusion" to the *Renaissance*, Pater turns this intense, concentrated enquiry upon the human body, revealing it as comprising natural elements in flux:

What is the whole physical life in that moment but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names?... Our physical life is a perpetual motion of them—the passage of the blood, the wasting and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain by every ray of light and sound—processes which science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces (186).

This excerpt appears to be triumph of objectivity, with the scientific, detached gaze revealing the body – and by extension, the self residing in the body – to comprise a series

of evanescent impressions of dissolving elements in flux (Williams 17-18). But objectivity itself is dissolved in the succeeding paragraph,⁶ which traces the same process from within:

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflexion begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like a trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions—colour, odour, texture—in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind (187).

In a reverse portrait of the previous paragraph, the revelation of the decomposed nature of the external world – “what is *real* in our life” (188) – appears to revert to the stability of the perceiving subject. Williams argues that here Pater “grapples with the notion that the long tradition of empiricist epistemology has undergone a dialectical reversal: a discourse instituted to counteract the classical form of idealism by relying on the evidence of the senses seems to have circled back to enunciate another, subjectivist form of it” (20-21). But it would be more accurate to see this “reversal” of empiricism as a recovery of the ‘subjective’ tendencies implicit in empiricism itself – that is, of the awareness in classical empiricist texts that mind shapes and selects the impressions it receives, as we have seen

⁶ For the way the two opening paragraphs play off against each other, tracing the same process of observation from outside and inside, see Williams 14-37).

in our discussion of John Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in the opening chapter on Ruskin.⁷ As Peter Garratt writes, the mid-nineteenth century British writers and scientists were becoming increasingly aware that the self, the source of sensory experience, was constituted and rendered unstable by experience (an awareness that, as we have seen, is implicit in the work of Locke himself): "The contingent self was conceived simultaneously as the route toward knowledge and its obstacle (Garratt 16). In this context, Pater's argument that the "the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind" makes explicit, and exaggerates, the implicit subjectivist tendencies of empiricism and objectivity. At the same time, however, we have seen in our discussion of "soul" in style how subjectivity is not a separate, unified entity that generates details out of itself, but an elusive, diffuse entity that inheres in the details it creates through selection and analysis. If the subject sees the external world of nature id dissolving into impressions, it is itself dissolved in the objects it observes:

Analysis goes a step further still, and tells us that those impressions of the individual to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is. To such a tremulous wisp

⁷ To recapitulate briefly: in the chapter on Ruskin, we saw the idea of the mind in Locke's John Locke's *Essay* (which Ruskin read before writing *Modern Painters I*, and which influenced his epistemology in his early work) is dual in nature: Locke's claim that the mind functions initially as a camera obscura or "dark room" that passively receives immediate sense impressions is followed by that of the mind actively selecting, abstracting, and recombining those impressions to form ideas.

constantly reforming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is *real* in our life fines itself down. It is with the movement, the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off,—that continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves (188).

What begins as the subject's intense outward orientation that decomposes external objects to the flux of their constituent elements, now turns inward, decomposing the subject itself into a diffuse flow. Carolyn Williams argues that the "opposite and interlocking discourses" in the first two paragraphs of the Conclusion together appear to "seem to suggest that 'modern thought' in general – regardless of the specific mental processes or the particular disciplinary methods enforced – tends to dissolve subject and object in relation to one another" (2). This mutual dissolution of subject and object is certainly borne out in the above paragraph, which consummates and subverts-- the Hegelian dialectic of the subject realizing itself in the object: here the subject dissolves itself in the dissolution of the objects it traces. However, if subject and object are mutually unraveled, this also creates the opportunity for future reconstitutions of the subject through its continued self-objectification in the phenomena it experiences: "that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves" (188).

It is in light of the continual dissolution and reconstitutions of the self that we can interpret Pater's directive to absorb as many experiences as possible within the stretch of our finite lives.

Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us,—for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? [...]

To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life... While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion... (188-9).

The perceiving subject can reconstitute itself by realizing – or rather, creating – a “perfect form” or image for the very flux of dissolving impressions into which it perceptually decomposes external phenomena. In creating an image for this flow, the self momentarily realizes itself in it, and then lets it go. Pater himself leads the way with his succession of exquisitely diffuse metaphors of flow between different states or modes, which capture the paradox of form an image for unstable, fluctuating phenomena: “some mood of passion” (188). Carolyn Williams identifies the fundamentally contradictory nature of Pater’s metaphors of flow, which, she claims, “attempt to implicate two incompatible forms of incoherence: atomism and inextricable interrelation” (17). But the attempted implication – or yoking – of two fundamentally unrelated fields of semblance and meaning is in keeping with the very function of metaphor itself. nor does the juxtaposition have to succeed, for – recalling the chapter on Robert Browning – the very oddity of metaphorical juxtapositions can open up latent potentialities of thought, or generate new possibilities. In the case of Pater’s metaphors, the primary possibility

generated by his metaphors of flow is of “fixing” fleeting experiences, in a form or image that does not freeze them, but preserves and conveys their shifting nature. finding an image for “fixing” the flux of experience also opens the way to finding an image for one’s own self.

The self that “weav[es] and unweav[es]” itself in its own experiential flux is an aesthetic phenomenon. It is a paradoxical image of flux that dissolves as well as resolves itself continuously, generating rhetorical and historical figures that form to its own experience. In order to understand Pater’s image-ination of subjectivity, it is necessary to refer to one of Pater’s leading contemporaries in Continental philosophy, in whose thoughts it is possible to find illuminating reflections as well as reversals of Pater’s own: Friedrich Nietzsche.

The similarities of the aesthetic philosophies of Pater and Nietzsche have frequently received attention, with Harold Bloom claiming that Pater “is the nearest thing to Nietzsche England has, as Emerson is Nietzsche’s nearest match in America... [which] could be put less invidiously by saying that Nietzsche is the Pater of the German-speaking world” (97). Despite there being no evidence that they read each other, both led late Romantic reactions against the ideals of formal perfection and order that define neoclassical aesthetics, to the extent of revaluating ancient Greece itself, as we shall see below; both view aesthetics as the primary mode of understanding the self and its engagement with the world’s phenomena. The most significant point of contact – and of difference – lies in the nature of that engagement, in which they locate the significance of art.

Nietzsche's view of aesthetics is formed by his strong opposition to free individual subjectivity and rationality. Drawing on Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimistic view of the non-rational Will, Nietzsche challenges the essential rationality of the Hegelian spirit, and its teleology towards increasing freedom and self-realization. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he famously argues that the highest state of being is "not being" – being part of, or reverting to, the turbulent, formless primordial unity of being that he calls *ur-Eine*. Nietzsche identifies this primordial unity with the Dionysiac drive, the impulse towards the ecstatic dissolution of self that characterizes the state of intoxication, and that is realized in "the imageless art of music" (14). Though this primordial Dionysiac unity is the ultimate reality, it also needs "the ecstatic vision, intensely pleasurable semblance" for "its constant release and redemption" (14). It attains this semblance in the creation of individuated or "Apolline" images.⁸ Thus, the phenomenal world is itself such an image, being "the release and redemption (*Erlosung*) of god [the primordial unity], achieved at each and every moment, as the eternally changing, eternally new vision of the most suffering being of all... able to redeem and release itself only in *semblance* (*Schein*)" (8); hence Nietzsche's renowned statement that the world can only be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. In this scenario, empirical reality is itself a semblance of this primordial unity, and we ourselves, embedded in this reality, must feel it to be so: "We... who consist of and are completely trapped in semblance, are compelled to feel this semblance to be that which truly is not, i.e. a continual Becoming in time, space, and causality - in other words, empirical reality" (26). Thus, our own "reality," "our empirical existence,

⁸ Thus, the Dionysiac and the Apolline, though manifesting conflicting tendencies, depend on each other: the Dionysiac needs expression through Apolline images in order to reach its spectators, while the Apolline originates in and expresses the Dionysiac.

and indeed that of the world in general” is “a representation (*Vorstellung*) generated at each moment by the primordial unity” (26).

As aesthetic phenomena, the self and the world are different modes of art, the Dionysiac primal unity made “objective,” and the object of Kantian disinterested “contemplation,” by way of Apolline individuation. At the same time, art’s purpose is the agonized yet ecstatic dissolution of the individuated self into the primal unity – hence the pleasurable terror of Greek tragedy: “the prime demand we make of every kind and level of art is the conquest of subjectivity, release and redemption from the ‘I’, and the falling-silent of all individual willing and desiring” (29). Thus, the self as an aesthetic phenomenon is the semblance of a primal unity, and its end – both its purpose and its eventual ending – lies in the loss of self, its dissolution and reversion to that unity: “the entire opposition between the subjective and the objective... is absolutely inappropriate in aesthetics since the subject, the willing individual in pursuit of his own, egotistical goals, can only be considered the opponent of art and not its origin” (32).

While Pater is also invested in the dissolution of the subject/object divide, he seeks to find images for this dissolution. He is highly invested in the pleasures and gains in perception that accompany images, which affix a single, centralizing, sensuously apprehensible form upon a flux of manifold, fleeting phenomena. Accordingly, he views the mutual dissolution of the subject and the object through a succession of images where reconstitution follows dissolution. In his tellingly titled essay “A Study of Dionysus: The Spiritual Form of Fire and Dew” (*Greek Studies*, 1894), he envisages Dionysus – the god of dissolution himself – in terms of images. The religion of Dionysus itself appeared to his followers as “one clearly conceived yet complex symbol” - “the imagery of the vine

and the cup” (2) – which is itself affixes an image on the formless state of Dionysiac intoxication or “*Rausch*” of Nietzsche’s work (15). This image of the vine brought together “many fascinating trains of reflexion, [of] colour and substance,” much as the name of Dionysus himself “recalled to the Greek mind, *under a single imaginable form*, an outward body of flesh presented to the senses, and comprehending, as its animating soul, a whole world of thoughts, surmises, greater and less experiences” (2-3; my emphasis). As “the projected expression of [his followers’] ways and dreams, brooded over and harmonised by the energetic Greek imagination,” the image of Dionysus in art and poetry exemplifies the aesthetic function of the “the religious imagination of the Greeks,” which is a “unifying or identifying power, bringing together things naturally asunder” (22). Interestingly, this “unifying power” of the Greek imagination also functions in the medium of human subjectivity, by -

“[W]elding into something like the identity of a human personality the whole range of man's experiences of a given object, or series of objects all their outward qualities, and the visible facts regarding them all the hidden ordinances by which those facts and qualities hold of unseen forces, and have their roots in purely visionary places” (22-3).

Greek religious imagination, like aesthetic imagination in general, affixes a single, unifying, sensuously apprehensible image upon the flux of internal as well as external phenomena. At the same time, the constitutive flux of this image constantly threatens to dissolve it into its constituent impressions, so that “all through the history of Greek art, there is a struggle, a *Streben*, as the Germans say, between the palpable and limited human form, and the floating essence it is to contain” (28). Pater locates this struggle at

the core of Greek tragedy, which enacts the dissolution of Dionysus into the constituent elements of fire and dew that threatened him: as Dionysus Zagreus, he was torn to pieces and burnt by the Titans, before being rescued by Zeus and hidden in the dew so that he could be reborn through Semele (37). The parallels with Nietzsche are inescapable: not only do both writers use the myth of Dionysus Zagreus (52) as the basis of the tragic plot of Dionysus, but they also represent his tragedy as one of dissolution. The crucial difference, as Albert Heinrichs points out, is that while Nietzsche represents dissolution as reversion to a primal, un-individuated unity, Pater views Dionysus's dismemberment in terms of "the division of this primordial oneness into individuals" (222). Pater thus imagines the dissolution of the self as a decomposition into individuated images. At the same time, these images are shaped by the artificial imposition of unity on fundamentally unstable phenomena, so that they are themselves unstable and liable to dissolve and be reconstituted.

Pater's attempt to figure the experiential flux of internal as well as external phenomena reveals his attempt to have it both ways, as it were: to retain the image of unity and centrality of the Greek imagination, as well as the dissolving flux that underlies, enlivens, and threatens the image. His attempt to reconcile image and flux – and more broadly, to reconcile contradictory ideas through images – guides his great project of extending Classicism into modernity in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.

Pater's Renaissance figures give form to a relational understanding of subjectivity, where the distinct identities of subject and object are blurred. They are historical figures that are also aesthetic creations, where Pater's self is mingled with

historical facts till the divide between them is obscured; in fact, as we shall see shortly, Pater's great representation of historical fact – the Renaissance – is an aesthetic creation that shows his subjectivity at its most imaginative. At the same time, Pater's figures are subjects in their own right, which take historical circumstances as the basis of their own artistic or philosophical engagements, often through metaphor and allegory, so that Pater's creation of figures continues the aesthetic-historical process of figuration that he identifies in the Renaissance. Subjectivity does not reside in a distinct subject, or objectified self, but in the relation between the two.

Pater's great image or figure is the Renaissance itself, a superbly generous aesthetic creation the temporal and philosophic scope of which exceeds the historical limits of the Renaissance. For Pater, the Renaissance is not so much a discrete historical epoch but a mood or sensibility, characterized by a broad, diffused scope and a liberality of temperament: "To reconcile forms of sentiment which at first sight seem incompatible, to adjust the various products of the human mind to each other in one many-sided type of intellectual culture, to give humanity, for heart and imagination to feed upon, as much as it could possibly receive, belonged to the generous instincts of that age" ("Pico della Mirandola" 23). The primary "forms of sentiment" that the Renaissance seeks to reconcile are the Classical culture of ancient Greece and Rome, and the culture of Christianity that displaced it. This reconciliation has been commonly interpreted in Arnoldian terms – as the free intellectualism of Hellenistic "sweetness and light" in Hellenism merging with the spirituality and moral seriousness of Hebraism. However, I propose that we can attain a richer understanding of this reconciliation if we also consider its implications in terms of the idealist aesthetic philosophy of which Pater was a leading

exponent at Oxford.⁹ If we recall our previous discussions of Hegel, Classicism and Christianity also correspond (at least where temporality is concerned) to the “Classical” and modern or “Romantic” stages of art, that is, to the perfect adequation of form and content epitomized by Classical art, and the lack of fit that characterizes aesthetic modernity. The attempted reconciliation of these two modes of spirit in the Renaissance is of a piece with the Romantic idealism we saw in Pater’s conception of style: an ideal of perfect correspondence of form and content that is built on fundamentally unreconciled art forms whose formal imperfection bespeaks an advanced subjectivity. Such a composite unites formal beauty and spiritual self-consciousness, creating an ideal for modern art. At the same time, however, the fundamentally contradictory nature of this ideal ensures that modern artworks will not be frozen in their perfection, but change in keeping with the fleeting nature of modern life itself.

Accordingly, Pater’s chosen Renaissance figures are characterized not only by their attempts to reconcile Classical and Christian culture, but more specifically by the failure or qualified success of those attempts, which manifests the fundamental contradiction at their core. His Pico della Mirandola gamely seeks to reconcile Christianity with classicism by means of allegory. The “quicksand of allegorical interpretation” enables him to “misrepresent” the fundamentally irreconcilable surface features (“the language, the conceptions, the sentiments”) in favor of bringing up “the supposed secondary, or still more remote meaning,” which could be represented – and juxtaposed - as an: “The religions of the world were to be reconciled, not as successive

⁹ Walter Pater, along with Benjamin Jowett (the master of Balliol College), J.P. Mahaffy (Wilde’s Tutor at Trinity College) and T.H. Green, were among the leading teachers of German philosophical idealism, and in particular the philosophy of Hegel, at Oxford in the 1870s; among their leading pupils was Oscar Wilde, who seeks his own reconciliation of Classical and modern culture in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

stages, in a gradual development of the religious sense, but as subsisting side by side, and substantially in agreement with each other... Plato and Homer must be made to speak agreeably to Moses" (26). While Pico's allegory fails because of the fundamental irreconciliation of Classical and Christian philosophical systems, his resorting to allegorical images indicates that this reconciliation can only be achieved in art. This turns out to be the art of Botticelli, who paints pictorial allegories in which Classical subject matter is combined with modern spirituality: his Venus, for instance, is a Greco-Roman goddess, representative of eros, is "painted in the Gothic manner," and situated in a meticulously depicted landscape that is characteristic of modern art. But even in Botticelli's Venus, Pater sees a "quaintness of design" that attests to the contradictions underlying the reconciliation of Classicism and Christian modernity: Venus has a "wistful" expression, as if lost in the dream-search for an ideal that remains unrealized, and her coloring – that marker of modern "Romantic" virtuosity – is "cadaverous, or at least cold," like a marble statue in the process of grotesquely incomplete reanimation. Thus, the wondrous reconciliation of Classicism and Christianity in Renaissance is remarkable precisely in its failure.

The failed reconciliation of the Classical ideal and modern or Christian modernity recalls the fortuitous lack of fit between form and content in modern or "Romantic" art, and it is indeed in a (temporally) modern figure, out of tune with his own time, that Pater at last sees a kind of reconciliation. The eighteenth-century founder of classical archeology, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, is "not of the modern world," for he is temperamentally closer to the Hellenic spirit. Yet he manifests the Hellenistic spirit not only intellectually, in his study of classical sculpture, but also sensuously, through his

temperament as well as his associations with men, in the Platonic tradition of companionship that is as much erotic as it is intellectual. His personal Hellenism enables him to “deal with the sensuous side of art in the pagan manner,” examining classical statues without any Christian shame or modern self-consciousness; at the same time, however, it isolates him from the current of his own age, leading him to shrink his life and interests into the narrow space of his classical vocation. The narrow, intense focus of Pater’s Winckelmann enacts the narrowness of the Hellenic ideal, that flawless correspondence of form and content that is frozen in its perfect fit. Such an ideal, Pater claims, in his Hegelian conception of aesthetic history, is ill suited to the changeful and relative nature of modern existence, where it will cause “an *ennui* which ever attaches itself to realisation, even the realisation of perfection.” Instead, modernity demands “conflict... some sharper note [to] grieve the perfect harmony, in order that the spirit, chafed by it, might beat out at last a broader and profounder music” (177-8). Pater locates the dramatization of this conflict in the modern “Romantic” art of literature, which, following Hegel, he declares best suited to “the modern world, with its conflicting claims, its entangled interests, distracted by so many sorrows, so many preoccupations, so bewildering an experience” (168-9). While Hegel’s rationale for equating language, however, is the deeply unreconciled nature of language, with its proliferation of details unrelated to direct expression, Pater views language as the means to create a “unity” all the more necessary in the variegated finitude of modern life. It is here that the anachronistic Hellenism of Winckelmann’s nature becomes evident: through his literary influence, he “prints” this Hellenistic unity on the imagination of Goethe, who would go on to achieve the reconciliation of Hellenism and Christianity in his literary work. In

works such as *Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), Goethe examining modern life with Classical “blitheness and repose,” thereby achieving the Romantic idealism that Pater seeks: the “marriage of the Hellenic element” of “unity with oneself” with the full variety of “modern interests” and “perplexed currents of modern thought” (169).

For Pater, the greatest significance of Goethe’s achievement is that through his commingling of Romanticism and Hellenic idealism, he shows the two to be not so opposed after all. Pater claims that the history of art has been warped by “trenchant and absolute divisions,” among them the “Pagan and Christian art,” when they are “really continuous” (180). In fact, Pater renders the Hegelian history of art more continuous, by tracing Romanticism continuity back to the Classical era: Greek religion, for all its self-contained ideality, nevertheless still evinced “a sort of preparation for the romantic temper,” in its “mournful mysteries of Adonis, of Hyacinthus, of Ceres” as well as the fall of the pre-Olympian, Titanic and chthonic deities (180). But even more than its tragic elements, Plato locates the incipient modernity of ancient Greece in forms featuring a proliferation of details: in particular, the Socratic dialogue, which he identifies as a precursor to the novel.

Pater locates a modern, richly sensuous, novelistic consciousness in his counterreading of Plato’s *Republic*. He claims that Plato renders his philosophically formidable generalizations regarding the character of states, through his observations of the “concrete traits of individuals”: “the difference in sameness of sons and fathers,” “the influence of servants on their masters,” and so on (180). Pater even insists that Plato’s richly detailed characterizations have “the peculiar fineness of Thackeray” (181), wistfully adding that he would have made “an excellent writer of fiction.” While he is not

a novelist, however, Pater's Plato combines poetry and philosophy in his Platonic dialogues, which render philosophical thought through two or more embodied voices. The idea of the Platonic dialogue as an artistic form recalls, and contrasts with, Nietzsche's analysis of the Platonic dialogue (69). Nietzsche viewed the Platonic dialogue, influenced by and featuring (the character of) Socrates, as the aesthetic manifestation of the adulterating influences of rationalism, self-consciousness, and optimism that Socrates had ushered into tragic Greece. These influences resulted in the disruption of the purity of Dionysiac form by the hybrid genre of the Platonic dialogue, which Nietzsche identifies as the precursor of the novel, and is "created by mixing all available styles and forms together so that it hovers somewhere midway between narrative, lyric, and drama, between prose and poetry, thus breaking the strict older law about the unity of linguistic form" (69). Where Nietzsche denigrates novelistic hybridity in rather neoclassical terms, Pater views this hybridity – as manifested in its richly realized particulars – as the site of the emergence of modern subjectivity. It is an early version of the Renaissance project of liberty, of the commingling of contraries that are reveals them to be not so contrary after all. Pater's novelistic reading of Plato is part of his expansion of the Renaissance as "an uninterrupted effort of the middle age, that it was ever taking place" – and continuous to take place, from Classical times to the present (180).

In fact, it is possible to take Pater's reading of continuity further, and in the process, create a more far-reaching lineage for modern details. According to Pater, Winckelmann himself "failed to see" the early intimations of Romanticism in Greek art and religion, for he was limited by his vision of the serenity ("*Heiterkeit*") and generality

(“*Allgemeinheit*”) of the Greek ideal (170). However, Winckelmann’s own creation of this ideal is paradoxically based on fragments of statuary that defy ideals of wholeness: the *Belvedere Hercules*, for instance, which he praises as “a lofty ideal of a body elevated above nature, and ... exalted to the degree of divine sufficiency,” is actually a mutilated torso that cannot even be conclusively identified as a representation of Hercules, let alone as an ideal of lofty serenity and grandeur (*History of Ancient Art* 2.264). Jacques Rancière correctly claims, “It will be forever impossible to judge whether the arms and legs of the *Belvedere Hercules* are in material harmony with the torso of the hero” (*Aisthesis* 4). Rancière identifies Winckelmann’s abstraction of this Greek ideal from mutilated fragments that represent the breakdown of ideal qualities, as an early instance of the “aesthetic regime of art,” the constitution of art as a realm of affective experience that disrupts the classical order by including previously excluded forms (1-20). We may view Pater’s aestheticization of modernity – by way of his retrospective ‘modernizing’ readings of Hellenism and the *Renaissance* – as carrying on the aesthetic regime of art. Much like Winckelmann, Pater himself chooses as the basis of his ideal of modern Hellenic perfection, instances of literary form that seem almost perversely chosen to frustrate that ideal through their proliferation of excess details.

One such curiously chosen instance is the poetry of Robert Browning. Pater views Browning’s poetry as a “brilliant example” of modern “artistic genius,” wherein Browning “conceiv[es] humanity in a new, and striking way,” in “the choice and development of some special situation, which lifts or glorifies a character, in itself not poetical” (170-1). In particular, Pater locates this ability of Browning in his use of “the most cunning detail, to complicate and refine upon thought and passion a thousand-fold,”

by creating the afore-mentioned “special situations” in which he places his characters (this reading is similar to Herbert Tucker’s identification of Browning’s details as “objectivizing devices” that interrogate subjectivity, “Dramatic Monologue” 229). However, as we have seen in the second chapter of this dissertation, Browning’s details famously overwhelm the semblance of ideal form in his work, and are themselves revealed to be the exaggerated appearance of objectivity generated by highly imaginative subjects. Perhaps it is Browning’s very resistance to idealization that leads Pater to choose him as an example of the ideal. Browning’s details, by virtue of their extreme, misshapen excess, represent the challenging variety and irregularity of modern life that Pater seeks to abstract into an ideal.

This ideal, like the historical Renaissance itself, is more remarkable in its failed ambitions than its impossible fulfillment. Pater’s main genre of choice for the marriage of Classicism and Christianity that characterizes his Renaissance (the prosaic poetry of Robert Browning notwithstanding) is modern fiction, and specifically the novels of Victor Hugo. In Hugo’s works, he finds “the strange interfusion of sweetness and strength” of the Renaissance spirit, which they carry to the nineteenth century and beyond. As we have seen in the case of Flaubert in the essay on style, Pater views Hugo and other modern prose writers as possessing the power of “refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits, according to the choice of the imaginative intellect” (170). This power plays out above all in the arena of detail: “What modern art has to do in the service of culture is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit” by representing man’s “naive, rough sense of freedom” in the limiting world of prose. Yet Hugo’s combination of Romanticism with a

realist attention to detail and contemporary social conditions does not represent an eternal ideal, but a shifting, transitional one. Once more, Pater finds his modern perfection upon a form that may not prove amenable to it. The paradoxes of this configuration play out in a novel closely aligned with Paterian precepts: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Details in and as the Picture of Dorian Gray

Dorian Gray – both the novel and the person – are striking for their lack of detail, of descriptive particulars; in this respect, if none other, Wilde's Aesthetic novel is similar to that seminal text of realism, *Middlemarch*. Where Eliot's reader is initially given a generalized and idealized description of Dorothea that withholds specifics such as the color of her hair or eyes (we learn of them later), Wilde's reader is supplied with only the barest particulars of Dorian's extraordinary beauty: Lord Henry mentally catalogues Dorian's "finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair" (17). Noting that "Dorian's beauty similarly lacks specificity," Audrey Jaffe traces this lack to the fact of beauty itself, which functions as an empty signifier: "the novel's ideal of beauty ('gold hair, blue eyes, rose-red lips') constitutes an evacuation of meaning: it is meant to signify nothing other than beauty itself" (296). The general nature of Dorian's beauty may be attributed to its ideality – that is, its affiliation with the "Ideal" of "Classical" perfection of Greek gods, and specifically with the androgynous god "Adonis" to whom Henry compares Dorian. As we have seen in discussions of Hegel, the statues of Greek gods are distinguished by their lack of particularity, of any parts that might disrupt the harmony of the whole by sticking out as a detail (*Aesthetics* 2.725; Schor 25). Specificity enters as the painting itself grows into ugliness, with the pathologized details of physical decay –

wrinkles, misshapen lines – ushering in realism, as we shall see in this section. All ideally beautiful men are alike; each ugly man – or portrait – is ugly in his own way.

It is easy – and to some extent, accurate – to ascribe the novel’s lack of detail to the avowed anti-realism of its most prominent speaker. Lord Henry declares to Dorian, in the aftermath of Sybil’s death, “One should absorb the color of life, but one should never remember its details. Details are always vulgar” (87). Details signify the “vulgar,” unaesthetic nature of everyday life, with its disregard for the artistic symmetry and harmony: its “absolute incoherence,” “absurd want of meaning, and “entire lack of style” (87). Henry urges Dorian to abjure the sordid details of everyday life in favor of an aesthetic stance that inheres in subtly absorbing the impressions and moods evoked by extraordinary experiences; accordingly, he encourages Dorian to look at Sybil’s death as an aesthetic phenomenon. But this stricture follows the pattern I have outlined in Pater’s work, namely, that of apotheosizing the details of everyday life, rather than banishing them. The aestheticization of life, which enacts Pater’s directive to concentrate upon and realize every moment as a “perfect form,” represents the consummation of the entry of modern life – as represented by details of modern literature and genre painting, among other ‘unaesthetic’ forms – into the classical representational order, as we have seen in our discussion of Rancière. Aestheticism and realism are not opposed; instead, Aestheticism makes explicit the aestheticization of the previously marginalized category of ‘real life’ that is at the core of the modern idea of art.

Realism and Aestheticism converge in the portrait of Dorian Gray, even before its mysterious and terrible transformation has begun. An ideal portrait is already in transgression of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century hierarchies of painting.

Neoclassical artists such as Joshua Reynolds, who favoured the representation of “general truth” through idealized forms, placed portraiture low in the hierarchy of painting as it is “likely to enter too much into the detail” of individuals (“Third Discourse” 138) – even though, as Ruskin points out, Reynolds “enforced with his lips generalization and idealism, while with his pencil he was tracing the patterns of the dresses of the belles of his day” (5.46). The allure of details is a little more explicit in Hegel’s classification of portraiture: like Reynolds, he ranks portraiture low because of its tendency to focus on “the purely natural side of imperfect existence, little hairs, pores, little scars, warts,” all of which the portraitist must abjure in order to “grasp and reproduce the subject in his universal character and enduring personality” (1.155-6). Yet, as Naomi Schor points out, the details he would banish from representation hold an “extraordinary fascination” for him, and through his ostentatious *preteritio* – the rhetorical technique of mentioning something by professing to omit it – he paradoxically includes through his writing the details he would banish from representation (Schor 23-4). By the end of the nineteenth century, when Basil Hallward picks up his brush to paint his ideal, the portrait genre is a battleground for the supposedly opposed tendencies towards realism and idealism in art. But as he wrote in his notebook, Wilde himself does not view these two tendencies as opposed, and the portrait of Dorian Gray – “a wonderful work of art, and a wonderful likeness as well” – is an image of their coalescence.

The portrait of Dorian is at once ideal and real because of the peculiarity of its subject, an ideally beautiful young man. Basil can paint him with minute fidelity, and in the process, remain faithful to the canon of beauty. Yet the portrait of Dorian is an ideal image placed on – and threatened by – a complicated, triangular network of shifting

relationships between the three men in the room. Before Henry entered the picture, so to speak, the artistic relationship between Basil and Dorian was already a mutually constitutive relationship between subject and object destabilized the divide between the two designations. On first meeting Dorian, Basil had fallen under his influence: “I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself” (9). However, when he paints Dorian, he describes the process as painting himself: “I have put too much of myself into it... every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself” (8). But as he admitted, his own self was already influenced by Dorian, so that what gets painted is this subtle interchange of influence where the identifies of the subject and object are in flux. Into this reaction enters Lord Henry as a catalyst, as it were:¹⁰ he is neither artist nor art object at first, and yet his exhortations about the wonders of youth and beauty come as a revelation to Dorian. That Dorian views this as revealing himself to himself shows the extent to which the subject/object distinction is in flux: he can no longer distinguish between his own thoughts and those of Lord Henry, to the extent that his own subjectivity becomes a creation, a self-objectification, of Henry’s. In the process, Henry becomes as much as an artist in his own right as Basil, the actual artist in this setting. At the same time, the effects of Henry’s words on Dorian’s soul are also manifest in his visible, enkindled appearance: “he stood there motionless, with parted lips, and eyes strangely bright” (19).

¹⁰ I am indebted to Jonah Siegel for pointing out the triangular nature of the interaction, and Lord Henry’s catalyzing function.

It is in this momentary state of stimulation that Dorian is immortalized on the canvas, so that the portrait becomes the result and image of a three-way relationship between individuals who are both subject and object, and linked by a relationship of mutual interchange and influence. It is almost disappointing that this extraordinary triangular flux is transmuted into a still image, however beautiful. Can the mysterious ability of the painting to change be somehow related to the heated interchange of influence that engendered it? We may never know, but it is perhaps no coincidence that the painting goes on to record in the still medium of visuality the continuing interchange of influence on Dorian, and his effect on others. In other words, the transformations of the painting make explicit the implicit transgressions of its hybrid status.

As a still image that nevertheless mysteriously changes with time, the portrait is a transgressive artwork on the crossroads of artistic mediums. As famously noted by Gotthold Lessing in *Laocoon*, the visual arts – painting and sculpture – are limited to representing “a single moment in time” by virtue of their material limitations (23); the representation of a sequence of actions in time is the prerogative of music and literature, which comprise a temporal sequence of signs. In visibly changing with Dorian’s inner moral alteration, the portrait becomes a paradoxical, hybrid artwork that combines the spatial capacity of visual art with the temporal capacity of music and literature. Ronald R. Thomas views the Dorian’s moving portrait as “foreshadowing” the modern art of motion picture, the first public screenings of which were held in England in 1896, six years after the novel’s publication (186-9). But there is another way of understanding the modernity of the moving portrait. Recalling Hegel’s discussion of aesthetics, painting – and portraiture in general – is a modern, “Romantic” or Christian art, where the spirit

produces meticulous representations of external nature not in sensuous form but in a medium generated of itself (such as color and light). However, the form (not the medium) of art most identified with Dorian – and specifically, his perfect beauty – is the “Ideal” or “Classical” art of Greek sculpture. As a Classical image that changes in time, in keeping with the moral state of its subject, the portrait is a realization of the confluence of Classicism and modernity – or rather, the realization of the modern tendencies implicit in Classicism – that is at the heart of Pater’s “Romantic” idealist project in the *Renaissance*. This modern Classicism finds utterance in the exhortations of Lord Henry, who urges Dorian to strive towards embodying a modern aesthetic ideal: “a new Hedonism,” even “finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal” (19), that combines the unity of form and content of (Classical) beauty with the self-consciousness of the modern spirit. The moving portrait would, by virtue of its hybrid medium, also embodies the fulfillment of this philosophical modern ideal, as its real-life counterpart would do in the medium of life, by giving “form to every feeling, expression to every thought,” in pursuit of the Paterian goal of “concentrat[ing] himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment” (111; see *Renaissance* 188).

However, much like Dorian himself, the portrait’s fulfilment of a newer, richer Hellenism becomes a terrible subversion, a record of decay manifested in the accrual of unsightly dermal details (“little hairs, pores, little scars, warts”) that had at once fascinated and repulsed Hegel (155-6). These details, which eventually take over the whole of the painting, mark the uncomfortable entry of the portrait into the realist representational order. The fantasy of hybrid form – the image of modern Hellenism, the embodiment of Romantic idealism – is transmuted into a grotesque hybrid.

Crucially, the minute observation of the decaying details of his portrait constitutes a key part of Dorian's aesthetic experience, his concentration of rich moments upon his own momentary existence:

He would examine with minute care, and often with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs (109).

The meticulous perceptual carving of the details that visibly overwhelm his idealized image fills Dorian with horrified, fascinated delight. This reaction may be as much due to the frisson of seeing the innermost secrets of his soul made form, as it is to his artistic activity: for Dorian is at once spectator, artwork, and artist here, watching the visible effects of his own actions accrue on his portrait. This complex aesthetic experience is heightened by the complicated structure of perception he builds, for he stands before the portrait by Basil with a mirror (possibly the one with cherubs gifted by Henry?), comparing two very different images: "The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure" (109). Through this tripartite structure of perception, which recalls the triangular structure of desire in Basil's studio, Dorian realizes aesthetic experience as a state of flux between three entities (himself, and two very different images that are objectifications of his self) whose identities shift between subject and object.

Dorian's perceptual play between his mirror image and the decaying portrait becomes a key element of his "aesthetic education." This process is at once an enactment and a travesty of the aesthetic education outlined by Friedrich Schiller, who famously argues that aesthetic experience can cultivate individuals to take their place in society as moral beings; in Dorian's case, his education proceeds along amoral lines, and ends with his own dissolution and death. Schiller advocates the cultivation of aesthetic experience as it encourages man to play – to enter into a state where he apprehends his existence as at once sensuous and ideal, thus inwardly attaining the perfect reconciliation of form and content that Schiller locates in the gods of Greek sculpture (69). While Schiller's choice of the Greek gods reveals his affiliation with the perfect, eternal symmetries of classical art, this identification was already disrupted by Wilde's time. Hegel notably locates the play-drive of the Greek gods in the minutely detailed beggar boys of the Spanish genre artist Murillo, thereby upending the hierarchy of artistic genres, and refiguring play as a liberating and dissolutive force that breaks down social and affective hierarchies, so that "men and women without quality" can experience infinite sensible possibilities in the mundane. Hegel's relocation of play in the details of genre painting was noted by Lewes (as we saw in the chapter on Eliot) – and by Pater, who views Murillo's *Beggar Boys* as a bench-mark of "life-like charm" with which Plato's richly figured representations of the dice-players in *Lysis* can be favorably compared (114-5). In this context, Dorian's hybrid portrait as the object of play – at once ideal and real, moving and still, Classical and modern – intensifies the fluidity of hierarchies and genres that characterizes the concept of play in the nineteenth-century.

Observing the portrait, however, comprises only one aspect of Dorian's aesthetic (self-)education, which is largely represented in the text as proceeding through his intense experience of works of art. This representation of this process occupies the bulk of the (in)famous ninth chapter of the novel, surely among the "long stretches of the story" in the novel that Jeff Nunokawa describes as being "almost unbearably uninteresting" ("Importance" 357). This chapter is indeed a curious interlude in the novel, for here the plot is suspended in favor of a succession of sensuous experiences, enacting the unnamed "novel without a plot"¹¹ given by Henry, which is a "a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own" (106). Nothing seems to specifically happen in this chapter – and yet everything has happened, for by the end of this interlude (stretching across eighteen years), the gilded youth emerges as an equally gilded and youthful reprobate who murders his portraitist friend. What kind of transformation transpired during this interlude?

The chapter's plot-lessness, together with its rich descriptions of artistic riches, is illuminated when we recall that the disruption of plot is very much part of the onset of the modern, aesthetic order that also signified by the proliferation of descriptive details. Jacques Rancière writes that the very idea of plot as a sequence of momentous actions committed by consequential, aristocratic characters, is part of the older, classical representational order. This order is suspended by the profusion of details in nineteenth-century realism – parts that do not belong to a narrative whole – and that signify a

¹¹ The novel is unnamed in the 1891 edition; in the 1890 edition it is called "*Le Secret de Raoul, par* [by] *Catulle Sarrazin*" (184). It is identified by Nicholas Frankel as a fictionalization of (among other sources) Pater's "Conclusion," and especially, the French Decadent novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans's *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*) (185).

democratic sensible order where anyone can experience the action or the ennui previously reserves for aristocrats, and where the minutiae of everyday life can inspire intense passions (Rancière 2009). While Aestheticism has ostensibly elitist sentiments regarding the tyranny of mediocre, bourgeois taste that characterizes modern democracy (Lord Henry, in particular, mocks the “rage of the English democracy”), the underlying principle of plotlessness – the suspension of the aristocratic, classical paradigm of causality and action – is the same as that of the democracy of detail bitterly criticized by D’Aurevilly in Flaubert’s work (Rancière 2009). Martin Puchner identifies a similar dynamic (though his referent is dramatic form rather than the novel) in Wilde’s critical dialogue *The Critic as Artist*, subtitled *With Some Remarks upon the Importance of Doing Nothing*. Wilde’s main speaker, Gilbert, provocatively claims that talking, or criticism, is the harder than doing, or making art: “It is very much more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it” (359). Talking is the province of criticism, which is a more advanced and autonomous than art. Puchner writes that “inaction is Wilde’s way of undermining and reusing the category of action - the traditional center of the dramatic form - for other purposes,” namely, “leisurely talking, reading, and writing” (87). Yet Wilde’s subversion of the category of action goes even further than Puchner recognizes. Wilde not only revalues the virtues of inaction, but he does so by equating the utmost inaction to the utmost action, so that the divide between the two is suspended: one can be at once most absorbed and creative precisely where one appears idle. It is in this light that we can view Dorian’s aesthetic adventures in the ninth chapter.

Critics have largely focused on the consumerist aspects of the artistic riches in which Dorian indulges; with Jeff Nunokawa comparing the succession of riches to “a

shopping list” (“Importance” 365), and Ronald R. Thomas likening it to the advertisements that were integral to nineteenth-century market (187-8). Without discounting the usefulness of these materialist interpretations, I would like to focus on the dizzying aesthetic upheavals and transformations in the rich descriptions, and their implications for the representation of subjectivity. Crucially, the artworks described (jewels, embroideries, and so on) belong to the domain of decorative arts, which were subordinated in the classical order of representation to the “fine arts” (sculpture, painting, and so on), for being the mechanical work of artisans, as opposed to the imaginative work of free men of genius (*Aisthesis* ix). The onset of the aesthetic regime of arts undermined this divide between the fine arts (meant for man’s free, disinterested aesthetic contemplation) and the decorative arts (which were functional, in the sense that they decorated man’s living spaces). In the first chapter on Ruskin, we saw an example of this disruption, where Ruskin championed Gothic details as expressing of the free imagination of the Gothic artisan. Wilde’s heightened description and central placement of decorative arts is very much in the tradition of the disruption effected by Ruskin’s Gothic details. At the same time, by making them the modes of Dorian’s aesthetic education, he confers on these decorative arts the status given by Schiller to the gods of Greek sculpture, so that these decorative arts become part of the ideal for aesthetic modernity.

However, it is not in their accumulated presence alone that these decorative crafts are significant. What is truly interesting about them are the aesthetic operations and transformations we find in descriptions of many individual objects. For instance, the sources of scent that Dorian accumulates are solid objects that give off fragrances that in

turn arouse specific moods in the inhalant: “He saw that there was no mood of the mind that had not its counterpart in the sensuous life, and set himself to discover their true relations, wondering what there was in frankincense that made one mystical, and in ambergris that stirred one’s passions, and in violets that woke the memory of dead romances” (113). In being sensuous objects that evoke spiritual effects, these scents embody the dissolution of the divide between matter and spirit, subject and object. Similar wonderment is roused by the embroideries he accumulates, that capture on cloth the diaphaneity of evanescent natural phenomena flowing from one state to another: “he sought to accumulate... Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the East as ‘woven air,’ and ‘running water,’ and ‘evening dew’” (118). Particular pride of place is given to gemstones that effect the appearance of instability – not unlike the “hard, gemlike flame” that Pater presents as a goal for his readers’ self-cultivation. The narrator writes that Dorian “loved the red gold of the sunstone, and the moonstone’s pearly whiteness, and the broken rainbow of the milky opal” – colors that comprise multiple or melting shades. Indeed, Dorian would spend “a whole day settling and resettling in their cases” stones with colors or forms that contain, mutate, or appear to generate more forms: and colors “the olive-green chrysoberyl that turns red by lamplight, the cymophane with its wirelike line of silver... carbuncles of fiery scarlet with tremulous four-rayed stars... amethysts with their alternate layers of ruby and sapphire” (115-6).

In capturing the flashing light of gems in words, Wilde’s verbal virtuosity recalls Hegel’s account of the painterly virtuosity of Dutch artists, who paint ephemeral, everyday phenomena – “metallic lustre, light... the glitter of wine in a transparent glass” and so on – with such consummate skill as to capture in paint the most fleeting aspects of

their appearances. Hegel particularly praises these recreations of the shifting play of color and light for making manifest the activity of spirit in mundane phenomena. He describes the spirit as literally shining in the play of light and color: “the spirit... transforms in its inmost being the external and sensuous side of all this material” (1.162). Rancière writes that spiritual activity is manifested in “illuminating their most evanescent aspect, closest to their shining and glittering surfaces, to the passing instant and the changing light” (Aisthesis 31-2). While these mundane Dutch details might appear to be the diametrical opposite of the rarified *objets d’art* savored by Dorian, yet these *objets* represent the elevation of the underlying principle of Dutch art in Hegel’s account: the aestheticization of lived experience, the gilding and bejeweling of transitory moments. These moments are made even more languorous and luxurious for the reader than they are for Dorian, or indeed the viewer of Dutch painting, in that they are rendered in the temporal medium of language, which prolongs each instant to its most languorous and luxurious extent.

The shifting gleams of gems have after all beguiled an infinitely more austere observer – *Middlemarch*’s Dorothea Brooke – who in the opening scene is struck, despite her Puritanical leaning, by “how deeply colors [of gems] seem to penetrate one, like scent” (9). Dorothea’s unusual synesthetic observation anticipates Dorian’s extraordinary experiences; even her observation – “I suppose that [the penetrating colors] is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John” – anticipates the blurring of the matter-spirit divide effected by Dorian’s art objects. While Dorothea, however, attempts to justify her own un-Puritanical obsession with gems, Dorian obviously feels no such need in spiritual justification, but instead luxuriates in the dissolution of the divide between spirit and substance for its own sake.

I pause momentarily on the description of precious stones to point out the subtle nature of Wilde's inventiveness: while he derives his information from *Precious Stones* (1883) by A.H. Church (a handbook to the Townsend Collection of Precious Stones in the South Kensington Museum, now the Victorian and Albert Museum), he subtly alters the description to heighten the processes of transformation. For instance, witness Church's description of the afore-mentioned chrysoberyl: "The green leaf, or deep olive green variety, known as alexandrite, of which fine flawless specimens of large size have been sent from Ceylon, is remarkable for appearing of a raspberry red hue by candle or lamplight" (90). Wilde's revision of this line is not only smoother and shorter, but also re-presents the "appear[ance]" of the "red hue" as an actual transformation: "the olive-green chrysoberyl that *turns* red by lamplight" (my emphasis). Nicholas Frankel writes that in this passage "Wilde renders [Church's] source material in a prose of subtle power, transforming it drastically in the process" (1890 197n). I would add that the specific "subtle power" that Wilde brings is that of subtle transformation, in keeping with his aestheticization of experiential flow. The shifting forms and colors of the rich objects he describes recall Browning's description of the objects on sale in the revenders' market, whose ontological status plays between parts and wholes (Book I, *The Ring and the Book*). The jagged interplay of Browning's objects reappears here, smoothed and idealized as the fluid colors and flashing lights of jewels – which reveals how instability in form and perception has become part of the aesthetic ideal.

Wilde crafts the flowing descriptions of objects as forms to represent the flow of Dorian's inner experience. The representation of flux shapes Wilde's "curious jeweled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of argot and of archaisms, of technical expressions

and of elaborate paraphrases” – a description ascribed by the narrator to the Decadent novel that poisons Dorian, but which also applies to the narration of this chapter. Linda Dowling views Wilde’s language here as a “diminution and trivialization” of Pater’s “complex and linguistically informed ideal of eclectic style” (144). Where Pater resorted to “euphuism” in *Marius the Epicurean* – “a self-conscious care for language, ‘extreme’ only in its assiduous attention to the complex linguistic structures of old and new, archaism and neology” (123) – to represent the heightened self-consciousness of the society he was depicting, Wilde (according to Dowling) reduces Pater’s philosophically-informed stylistic experiments to “slogan[s]” and dried argot” (144). But Wilde’s “argot,” far from trivializing Pater’s style, realizes its sensuous possibilities, as the descriptions of art objects that play a key role in a novel. As the objects themselves seduce Dorian, so their description seduces the reader. Like Dorian, the reader is invited to savor the luxuriously transitory quality of the visual impression, to abandon himself or herself to the beauty of shifting appearances. The seductiveness of Wilde’s style has a serious function: as the objects themselves constitute Dorian’s aesthetic education, so their description constitutes the education of the reader.

But Wilde’s “jeweled” portrayals of experiential flux has a more serious function still: through them, Wilde effects a portrait of Dorian’s changing soul in flux that cannot be represented directly. It would not be possible to directly depict the sexual mis/adventures that Dorian embarks on during this time (though the narrator provides a generalized account of Dorian’s shunning by members of society), and it would be aesthetically challenging to describe the corresponding changes in Dorian’s portrait in slow motion. The resulting figuration of Dorian’s subjectivity is akin to the process of

psychological displacement, where, as Freud writes, “indifferent experiences take the place of psychically significant ones... ideas which originally had only a *weak* charge of intensity take over the charge from ideas which were originally *intensely* cathected” (*SE*, 4:177). Freud’s theory of displacement has long been associated with figurative language, and in particular the figure of meronymy, where “the detail is not seen as referring metonymically back to a whole [the person’s memory] from which it has become detached” (Schor 84). However, Schor proposes a revisionist comparison of displacement to metaphor, where a detail becomes a metaphor for another detail, and not the detached part of a given whole. The result is a devalorization of totality, be it a pristine memory or (in the case of this novel) a pre-existing self. Simply put, the self that is indirectly rendered through these jeweled descriptions is not a given entity, but itself an aesthetic phenomenon that is prone to transformations and fragmentation. Inasmuch as the picture of Dorian Gray can be found in the novel (outside the portrait itself), it is found in these dissolute descriptive details. Nor can it be accessed other than through reading these details indirectly, through allusions and reflections, for any attempt at finding a direct embodiment of Dorian’s subjectivity here is doomed to failure.

The mutual dissolution of subject and object aestheticized in details is consummated with the famous ending. Though this scene is often characterized as a suicide, it would be more accurate to see it as an attempted murder that goes horribly wrong. In stabbing the painting to remove its influence upon his life, Dorian commits the very “murder” he had pleaded Basil not to do; that the attempted murder ends up[killing him attests to the dissolution of the subject-object divide in the novel. At the same time, this dissolution results in a final, irrevocable and untraceable interchange of identity:

one is unsure precisely which is Dorian and which is his portrait. At one level, obviously the hideous fallen man is Dorian. On another level, however, his subjectivity is now frozen in his eternal, ideal portrait, which becomes the image of his perpetual dissolution.

Conclusion

Though the fleeting and fastidious Aesthetic details of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde appear to be the opposite of the distinct details that proliferate in realist fiction, they are actually predicated on the same aesthetic principle: the breakdown of aesthetic boundaries, the inadequation of form and content through parts that do not fit into the whole. This core inadequation defies and enriches Aesthetic attempts to compose it into ideal form, even as these attempts attest to the increasing centralization of detail in nineteenth-century aesthetics.

The increasing importance of detail and its associated categories – the ornamental, the everyday, modernity – casts in a new light on the apparent “rejection of detail” in modern aesthetics (Arasse 107). One of the most well-known articulations of this rejection is found in the art criticism of Pater’s French contemporary, Charles Baudelaire. In his review of the “Salon of 1846,” Baudelaire fulminates virulently against the minute representation of details – of clothes as well as of skin - by the artist Horace Vernet: ““Who knows better than him how many buttons there are in each uniform...? I hate this man because his paintings are not [depicting the] point of painting, but an agile and frequent masturbation, an irritation of the French epidermis” (Arasse 27; my translation). Even more famously, he extensively praises the water-color artist and illustrator Constantine Guys for his fleeting images of Parisian street life. But his praise for the “painter of modern life” paradoxically consummates the centralization of detail in the

nineteenth-century, for he takes for his fleeting ideal the very area of everyday life that is equated with detail. Baudelaire and Pater both write from the other side of the disruption of the aesthetic order signified by details, which makes it possible for them to aestheticize every life – a process that is continued in moments that populate twentieth-century literary modernism. But where the Modernist moment is entirely internal, diffuse, and immaterial, nineteenth-century details inhere in the interplay between subject and object, matter and spirit: the boundaries between the inner self and the outer world are undone. The trajectory of details that I have outlined in this dissertation trace the taking of the world into the mind, which is also the mind opening into the work. That details become increasingly fleeting over the course of the nineteenth century, and increasingly absorbed into the whole, does not mean that they have been banished from the whole, but that they have taken it over, becoming the only wholes available to experience.

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