

©2020

Sean Christopher Hughes

All Rights Reserved

THE MORAL PSYCHOLOGY OF HISTORICISM  
FROM THOMAS CARLYLE TO OSCAR WILDE

By

SEAN CHRISTOPHER HUGHES

A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in English

Written under the direction of

Jonah Siegel

And approved by

---

---

---

---

New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION  
THE MORAL PSYCHOLOGY OF HISTORICISM  
FROM THOMAS CARLYLE TO OSCAR WILDE  
by SEAN CHRISTOPHER HUGHES

Dissertation Director:

Jonah Siegel

This dissertation develops a new perspective on the relationship between literature and ethical discourse in modernity by showing how the concept of virtue was revised by Victorian authors in ways that have shaped contemporary assumptions about the prospects for and value of participating in public life. Building on work by Amanda Anderson and Andrew Miller, I focus on the formal structures of ethical thinking in Victorian literature while reconsidering homologous structures within contemporary criticism. My analysis departs from earlier work by engaging the philosophical tradition of virtue ethics—a tradition exemplified by Aristotle and Plutarch—which defines a virtue as a favorable, cultivated disposition. I argue that several influential authors of the nineteenth century who were conversant with the tradition of virtue ethics urged their readers to develop what I refer to as *reflexive virtues*. Rather than appealing to practical wisdom, a key term for conventional theories of virtue, these Victorian authors attempt to define dispositions that will guide a person in recognizing what is good *relative to their historical situation*. Though the Victorians are often dismissed as dogmatically moralistic, I show that some of the major authors of the period turned particular forms of

relativism into virtues in ways that resonate with the tendency of literary critics in later eras to have recourse to claims about the praiseworthiness of particular dispositions—in particular, an investment in meeting the demands of one’s historical situation and a stance of cultivated skepticism towards the norms of one’s historical situation.

My dissertation’s chapters are arranged historically, taking five authors as case studies. Collectively, they show how reflexive theories of virtue played a crucial role in the co-development of relativism and individualism as dominant ethical positions, and how this history tracks a declining confidence in the possibility that individuals can find a mutually flourishing relationship with their society as a whole. In that sense, my project proposes a history and identifies the formal determinants shaping a condition that we have been too ready to naturalize. My first chapter reads Thomas Carlyle’s writings on what he calls heroes and hero-worship as an attempt to identify the rhetoric adequate to the challenge of the emerging historicist thought that would come to dominate so many elements of nineteenth-century culture. My goal is to recover the surprising nature of the claim that the relationship between one’s psychology and one’s historical situation could become the standard of the good life. My second chapter shows how Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Carlyle’s contemporary, uses the monologue form to subject sympathy to a “double-vision,” thereby finding in her poetic form a means of discerning the challenging interplay between individual psychology and historical circumstance. These early chapters allow me to locate a key element in the work of George Eliot, the subject of my third chapter. In Eliot, who is directly responding to both Carlyle and Barrett Browning, the process of reflexively balancing multiple sympathies becomes a mechanism for accepting the limitations of one’s sociohistorical situation. At the same time, the

techniques of narrative retrospect simulate the prospect of actively choosing those limitations as though one were taking up a definite role within history. The final chapter addresses the way Walter Pater's "self-culture" and Oscar Wilde's "critical spirit" fuse criticism with fiction to frame their ethical thinking around an individual psyche's encounter with fragments of history. Where the earlier theories of reflexive virtue attempted to find a felicitous relationship between self and historical situation, these late-century authors find it increasingly difficult to imagine an individual's flourishing as compatible with the flourishing of a community. They thus make a detached open-endedness into a virtue, much as it has continued to be in the days since they wrote (if less reflexively so).

While this project has a doubled historical element in that it looks back to the ways in which an earlier period itself looked to the past, my argument is at every point engaged with recent developments in literary studies. It may be understood, in part, as an attempt to acknowledge and give a history to the still underexplored relationship between historical relativism and moral judgment that shapes so much work done in the field. My hope is that by activating the affinity that exists between reflexive theories of virtue and the background assumptions of contemporary literary criticism—i.e., their shared investment in asserting value claims within a recognized context of contingency—it will become possible to more directly articulate and theorize what we hope to accomplish with the exhortatory moves and moralized methods of argumentation that remain largely implicit in literary criticism.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation was made possible by seven years of funding and health insurance from Rutgers University. Rutgers is also a uniquely exciting place to think about nineteenth-century literature. Colin Jager, Jonah Siegel, David Kurnick, Doug Jones, Meredith McGill, Billy Galperin, Carolyn Williams, Deborah Nord, John Kucich, and Lynn Festa led seminars that were demanding and expansive. I was accompanied by remarkable peers. Amy Cooper and Bakary Diaby are particular inspirations—not only as great philosophical-literary intellectuals, but also for their profound thoughtfulness. Elizabeth Greeniaus and Lech Harris made me proud to become a Victorianist, because they realize the originality of their visions with such passion and wit. Caro Pirri and Max Sater are better interlocutors than I deserve. They received my most tenuous and tangled ideas with generosity and helped me save several that wouldn't have survived on their own. Johnny Buonomo, Jesse Cordes Selbin, Isaac Cowell, Nani Durnan, Jimmy Goodrich, Jared Greenberg, Liz John, Courtney Krolczyk, and Jake Romonow all ministered to this dissertation, directly or indirectly. Like all of my peers, I am humbled by the precision and kindness that Cheryl Robinson and Courtney Borack brought to our department.

I owe a special debt to the members of my committee, and not only for their generous feedback. Jonah Siegel, Carolyn Williams, Nancy Yousef, and Andrew Miller each produced works of criticism that enabled me to make this argument.

I have never had a more perceptive editor than Jonah Siegel. Through the attentiveness and rigor of his criticism, he became this project's greatest benefactor.

My schooling began at a time when North Carolina still invested in its teachers; it was rewarded with exceptional educators like Wally Burke, Nancy Streblow, and Lucy Milner who each contributed something to the way that I imagine my vocation. At Haverford College, I had more great professors than I can list here, but Maud McInerney and Tina Zwarg deserve special thanks for helping me at pivotal moments. My comrades Ashley Gangi, Anastasia Nikolis, and Isaac Wheeler always keep my love of poetry from devolving. Nathan Pippenger has rescued me from several bad ideas, some of which would have prevented me from writing any of this. I continue to benefit from his good sense.

It is hard to imagine how I would have become a functioning adult without Harrison Haas, Becca Morgan, and Jonathan Calenzani. Each has added something to the way I see the world. Harrison and Becca took me in at my dreariest.

Most of my interests began during dinnertime conversations with my parents, Gloria Fitzgibbon and Michael Hughes, and my brother, Geoffrey Hughes. My parents have influenced this dissertation in many ways; the one for which I am most grateful is by showing me how joyful curiosity and moral seriousness can coexist and support each other. I dedicate this essay to them.

\* \* \*

Portions of chapter three have been accepted for publication in *English Literary History* as “George Eliot, Typology, and the Moral Psychology of Historicism.”

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	v
Introduction	1
1.1 Thomas Carlyle's Heroes	34
1.2 John Stuart Mill's Virtual Clerisy	64
2.1 Elizabeth Barrett Browning Rediscovered the Present	73
2.2 Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Double Vision	103
3.1 George Eliot – Sympathy as a Sacrifice to History	128
3.2 George Eliot's Typologies	169
4.1 Walter Pater's Self-Culture	201
4.2 Oscar Wilde's Critical Spirit	222
Afterword – The Persistence of Moralism in Historicism	247
Bibliography	255

## INTRODUCTION

The use of historicist thinking in scholarship and public life continues to rely on implicit assumptions about the dispositions with which people should approach history, a presumption that belies a deeper lack of agreement about what our obligations to history are, if we have any. This dissertation is about how people come to think of themselves as having a personal, ethically-charged relationship to history. The emergence of historicism in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries introduced new forms of skepticism about whether ethical claims are transposable from one historical situation to another. During the Victorian period, several authors attempted to adapt new conceptions of individual virtue so that they could accommodate this growing awareness of historical contingency. Developing an account of ethics that can incorporate and supersede the relativizing effect of historicism made historicism more widely acceptable and allowed it to inform more aspects of a person's life. As self-reflexivity about historical conditions became increasingly central in public discourse, the reception of historicism not only encouraged, but also, in turn, depended upon new ideas about what is virtuous, such as the belief that a person should want to meet the demands of their historical situation or that it is a sign of sophistication to remain in a state of cultivated open-endedness about ethical questions. By seeing how these dispositions initially developed in fiction, poetry, and rhetoric in the nineteenth century, we get a better sense of the potential disconnects and tensions between public and private deliberation, even in historicist discourses that are ostensibly oriented towards the social.

I track the central role that literature played in imagining the prospect for a felicitous relationship between individuals and collectives once both come to be seen as

individuated by contingent causal conditions—as individuals with particular psychologies, as communities with particular histories—such that their commensurability cannot be taken for granted. During the nineteenth century, the influential thinkers that I address in this dissertation—Thomas Carlyle, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde—theorized what I refer to as *reflexive virtues*, dispositions that derive ethical motivation and set ethical priorities from a recognition of the self as historically situated. Dwelling on the contingencies of existence can make ethical norms seem like arbitrary conventions, accidents of human judgment that have been doggedly preserved. But reflexive virtues are cultivated by reinterpreting historical contingency as an individuating condition, one that allows us to take a vocational relationship to our situation: what is contingent about a person’s historical situation gets recognized as what is unique about it. The workings of reflexive virtue leave behind a record of the psychological torsion involved in realizing one’s ethical prospects relative to one’s historical situation. In order to represent and enact an active relationship to history, reflexive theories of virtue increasingly come to depend upon the recognition of psychological affinities among people who are historically remote from each other, a process that I’ll refer to as *configuration*. Different ways of configuring oneself with another person are used to cultivate different relationships to history.

Collectively, my chapters show the co-development of historicism and individualism as dominant ethical positions, and how this history tracks a declining confidence in the possibility that individuals can find a mutually flourishing relationship with their society as a whole. In that sense, my project proposes a history and identifies the formal determinants shaping a condition that we have been too ready to naturalize. As

such, I am invoking “moral psychology” as a discourse to be analyzed, one that should be central to our understanding of the changing ways in which people have articulated the relationship between self and world. In this, I’m influenced by Charles Taylor’s concept of “strong evaluations,” which he defines as those that “involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged.”<sup>1</sup> Taylor’s term is clarifying because it identifies how evaluation is a crucial aspect of human relations while also recognizing that not all ethical frameworks depend upon the same kinds of judgments (i.e., they aren’t all conceived of as rules or ideals or what have you). He notes, for example, that our understanding of what it means to respect one’s obligations to others, to live a full life, and to have one’s dignity recognized are three different frameworks in which people conceptualize the good life, but that these frameworks have overlapped in various ways, and that sometimes one has subsumed another.<sup>2</sup> The force of Taylor’s analysis here is corrective: these three frameworks are not offered as a comprehensive model for categorizing different aspects of morality but as a demonstration that the strong evaluations that people make cannot be consistently reduced to any one framework. If we don’t attend to the various ways in which questions of value, priority, and obligation have been conceptualized and represented, then we run the risk of reverting to assumptions about self-interest that cannot help but be ideological. In this sense, reflection on the strong evaluations expressed in a period’s discourse about moral psychology is a necessary element for understanding its literature and culture.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 2

<sup>2</sup> Taylor 16.

There is a further cause for interest in nineteenth-century thinking about moral psychology, which is that public debates around the nature of the good life informed the emergence of literary studies as a field and continue to resonate in critical debates around methodology and the responsibilities of the critic.<sup>3</sup> Since the ethical turn of the nineties, there has been a range of work that takes an analytical approach to ethics in order to show how concepts and representational strategies from nineteenth-century literature persist or resonate in contemporary criticism. Amanda Anderson's work on detachment in *The Powers of Distance* (2001) and Andrew Miller's work on moral perfectionism in *The Burdens of Perfection* (2008) have been particularly enabling for this project. Anderson recovers the ways in which the cultivation of detachment remained a self-consciously "precarious and merely regulative ideal," as opposed to ever being a pretense to total disinterestedness. Her analysis is informed by her engagement with contemporary debates about the possibility of postconventional critique, in which nineteenth-century ideas of detachment are all too readily treated as a strawman. Miller conceives of moral perfectionism as "a narrative form" based in the attempt to "turn from our ordinary lives, realize an ideal self, and perfect what is distinctly human in us [...] in response to exemplary others," a form which works by the "translation of epistemological concerns into social dynamics." But Miller's study also occasions a broader meditation on the role of historicist and ideological criticism within literary scholarship and on what it means to

---

<sup>3</sup> For an influential account of the connection between the academic study of vernacular literature and Victorian moralism, see Terry Eagleton's "The Rise of English." While Eagleton views both the Leavisites and the New Critics as continuing the paternalistic and conservative stance of mid-nineteenth-century ideologies around literature, he also views them as having crucially modernized the field by challenging the primacy of personal admiration, as in the New Critical rejection of "the Great Man theory of literature." I'll argue that the Victorian investment in exemplary individuals has had a more enduring and adaptable role within the study of literature. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2003), 20-1, 41.

depart from these modes without rejecting their arguments.<sup>4</sup> These critics mark a shift away from emphasizing how ethical discourses are abjectly dependent on the exigencies of representation or on material and social conditions towards an interest in the ways in which literary and rhetorical formations enact and extend the various intersubjective dynamics that intellectual and social projects depend upon. The history of discourse around ethics becomes a privileged site for analyzing the social bearing of literature and rhetoric, both in the past and in the present.

In this spirit, my analysis of moral psychology does not posit a free-standing faculty or structure within human psychology that addresses questions of strong evaluation, but rather attends to the ways in which certain aspects of human psychology are back-formed and assumed in human relations, language, and the kinds of self-assessment enabled by those things. Not only can people engage in discourse about moral

---

<sup>4</sup> Jesse Rosenthal's work on moral intuitionism and narrative in *Good Form* (2016) and David Russell's work on the essay form in *Tact* (2018) pursue a similar convergence between literary historicism and critical self-reflexivity. Adela Pinch and Nancy Yousef have developed new analytical frameworks for considering the psychosocial dimensions of ethical thinking, frameworks which both augment and reinvigorate existing discourses around sympathy. In *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing*, Pinch considers what nineteenth century authors accomplished by entertaining the idea that thinking about another person can directly affect him or her, ultimately arguing that "acting as if your thoughts could affect others, for good or ill, may be an ordinary part of social life." Yousef thematizes the possibility of shared affective or cognitive experience under the rubric of intimacy, rather than sympathy, in order to attend to complexities that are all too often preempted by sympathy's presumed ideal of identification. Talia Schaffer's recent and forthcoming work on the ethics of care looks at how "communities of care" feature in Victorian literature. Like much of the work that I'm citing here, the ethics of care grounds its conception of ethics in the relationships and practices that people engage in, rather than in abstract rules or choices. My understanding of the changing role of ethics in literary scholarship was distinctly sharpened by hearing Schaffer speak on a panel about "Ethics in Victorian Studies" at Princeton University. Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 2001), 32, 24-33; Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 3, xii, 26-32; Jesse Rosenthal, *Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2016; David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2018); Adela Pinch, *Thinking about Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (NYC: Cambridge UP, 2010), 1, 16; Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2013), 1-2; Talia Schaffer, "Care Communities: Ethics, Fictions, Temporalities," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118:3 (July, 2019): 521-42.

psychology without making definite claims about how psychology works in general—they can even develop shared conclusions about moral psychology while providing completely incompatible accounts of the mental structures that make it so. In his *Autobiography*, for example, John Stuart Mill says that he shares an anti-self-conscious philosophy with Thomas Carlyle, but the account that he gives reveals that he’s translated Carlyle’s idea into the paradigm of associationist psychology, which Carlyle would never accept.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on moral psychology without attempting to adjudicate disagreements about the fundamental workings of human psychology, as such, will enable this project to track the role of assumptions about value in public life.

It is with this orientation towards public discourse that my dissertation uses the word *virtue*. That term has often been lifted into rigorous service by philosophers and theologians, but it also features in popular discourses around moral psychology, even when the professionals are neglecting it. A virtue is any favorable cultivated disposition with ramifications for multiple aspects of a person’s life—cultivated, unlike an innate talent, and with ramifications for multiple aspects of a person’s life, unlike an isolated habit.<sup>6</sup> Virtue has a prominent role in many pre-modern ethical theories—Aristotle’s

---

<sup>5</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography and other writings*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969), 85, 82-6. For Carlyle’s account of “diseased self-consciousness,” see “Characteristics,” *Carlyle’s Complete Works*, vol. xiv, (NYC: Lovell, 1869), 364.

<sup>6</sup> This definition of virtue is derived from *Intelligent Virtue* by Julia Annas, a contemporary philosopher. It effectively captures what is characteristic about virtue ethics—her definitions of the central terms of art for virtue ethics are endorsed by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*—but it underplays a question which is central to this dissertation. Theories of virtue are united by their investment in self-reflexive patterns of behavior and cognition, rather than isolated actions, but there are more and less historically-inflected ways of conceptualizing how dispositions relate us to our circumstances. Annas and Roslind Hursthouse, another influential contemporary philosopher of virtue, theorize the intellectual and emotional relationships one has towards one’s behavior, but their approach to that process of self-reflexivity is ahistorical, transposing terms from Aristotle’s Greek into modern life. In Alasdair MacIntyre’s theory of virtue, historical circumstance proves far more determinative. He insists that “a moral philosophy [...] characteristically presupposes a sociology,” and that virtues derive their coherence from socially significant practices, the continuities of a person’s life, and moral traditions. MacIntyre’s historicist approach to virtue was formative for this project, but not ultimately consonant with it. His project makes a leftist critique of the

*Nicomachean Ethics* remains the *locus classicus* in the Western tradition, but virtue is a central concept in the writings of Plutarch, in Christian ethics (they are central to Thomas Aquinas's thinking, for example), and in republican thought from the early modern period through the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> There are three affordances of the idea of virtue that make it especially useful for an analysis of the moral psychology of historicism: representations of virtue tend to rely on (1) exemplary individuals, (2) an attention to practical wisdom or the enactment of virtues relative to circumstance, and (3) an investment in the possibility of cultivating virtues through repetition. These features are oriented towards adapting one's knowledge of things past to the present, and of adapting oneself to possible futures. The iterative, circumstantial, and processual bearing of virtue makes it a framework especially well-suited to conceptualizing one's relationship to history and to thinking about it in literary study.<sup>8</sup>

---

centrality of instrumental reason in modernity, but he attributes the dominance of instrumental reason to the Enlightenment's removal of teleology from ethics. His project aims at not only the renewal of virtue as a concept but at forming monastic "local forms of community," resistant to modernity, as such. While I share MacIntyre's sense that virtues must be understood with reference to sociohistorical circumstance, my examples suggest a different way of conceptualizing virtue within modernity. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, (NYC: Oxford UP, 2011); Rosalind Hursthouse & Glen Pettigrove. "Virtue Ethics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (December 8, 2016 edition); Edward N. Zalta (ed.) URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (NYC: Oxford UP, 1999), 10-4; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame, 2015), 23, 187, 191, 263.

<sup>7</sup> The continued prominence of Aristotle (and, to a lesser extent, Plato and Aquinas) for contemporary theorists of virtue is discussed in Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue*, an overview of the field. For the theorization of virtue within republican thought from Early Modern Italy through the American founding, see *The Machievellian Moment* by J. G. A. Pocock. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (NYC: Oxford UP, 1999) 3, 8-16. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machievellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> While the word virtue has often been the cudgel of hypocritical scolds, the concept can be wonderfully deflationary, moving ethics out of the philosopher's mind-palace and into the relationships and routines that shape people's lives. The modern revival of interest in virtue was driven by women entering professional philosophy (like Phillipa Foote and G. E. M. Anscombe) and has tended to prize an attention to ordinary life that many have felt to be missing in Deontological and Utilitarian ethics. For these reasons, virtue has also been well-suited for comparative and multicultural work. For a concise and sophisticated account of the revival of interest in theories of virtue during the late-twentieth century, see Martha Nussbaum's article, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?" *The Journal of Ethics*. Vol. 3, No. 3 (1999) 163-201.

## The Paradigm of Emulation

To begin, let's briefly describe an approach to moral psychology that isn't marked by the kind of historicism that would reshape ethical thinking over the course of the nineteenth century. In his introduction to Plutarch's *Lives*, John Dryden praised historians as "they, who teach us wisdom by the surest ways [...] by the examples of the most famous men whom they record, and by the experience of their faults and virtues."<sup>9</sup> This idea—that one could find moral improvement by studying the famous dead—had already proved to be an enduring approach to ethical education when Dryden articulated it. It is essentially what Plutarch argues in his life of Pericles.<sup>10</sup> Some fifteen centuries after Plutarch had composed these biographies, to "experience" the virtues and failings of the great heroes of antiquity and then to modify one's behavior by their example, still seemed "the surest ways" for learning wisdom. That hope awaited an even greater flourishing in the nineteenth century, which saw a boom in the publication of collective and individual biographies recommended for self-improvement.<sup>11</sup> These numerous volumes about

---

<sup>9</sup> John Dryden. "The Life of Plutarch." *Plutarch's lives, translated from the original Greek. With notes critical and historical; and a life of Plutarch*. By S. Langhorne, D.D. William Langhorne, A.M. John Dryden, &c. Vol. 1. Edinburgh: Printed for C. Elliott, High Street, W. Creech, Parliament Close, and R. Munro, Nicholson Street, also J. Lackinton, 46, and 47, Chiswell Street, MDCCXCV. [1795]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Web. 1 Aug. 2016.  
<<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do&source=gale&docLevel=FASCIMILE&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=new67449&tabID=T001&docId=CB3330471740&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0>>

<sup>10</sup> "The mere outward sense, being passive in responding to the impression of the objects that come in its way and strike upon it, perhaps cannot help entertaining and taking notice of everything that addresses it, be it what it will, useful or unuseful; but, in the exercise of his mental perception every man, if he chooses, has a natural power to turn himself upon all occasions, and to change and shift with the greatest ease to what he shall himself judge desirable. [...] Such objects we find in the acts of virtue, which also produce in the minds of mere readers about them an emulation and eagerness that may lead them on to imitation." Plutarch, *Lives*, The Dryden Translation edited by Arthur Hugh Clough (NYC: Modern Library, 2001), 201.

<sup>11</sup> The sheer quantity of biographical writing published in the nineteenth century remains difficult to fathom. *How to Make it as a Woman* by Alison Booth, for example, gathers a bibliography of 930 collective biographies of women, but an early review of it was able to identify even further sources. When

exemplary individuals are entries in an exceptionally durable tradition built around an elegant formula—read about admirable people, emulate their virtues and avoid their failings, *mutatis mutandis*.

My reason for citing this continuity is not to suggest that the past is homogeneous in its naivete, but rather to recover a sense of what is so strange about departing from this paradigm of emulation. We are used to maligning imitation but it needn't be *slavish*, one of the word's more common modifiers. On the contrary, emulation is surely the source of much of what works in any person's life, and it's certainly not incompatible with adaptation but rather depends upon it. The rejection of such a flexible approach to personal ethics does not reflect an increase in sophistication or independence, but rather depends upon a dramatic reassessment of the relationship between ethics and history. While many Victorian texts about exemplary individuals hold to the paradigm of emulation, some of the period's studies of exceptional individuals began to confront doubts about the extent to which one can transpose ethical claims from one situation to another. It may be impossible or unadvisable to transfer lessons from some exemplary person's experience into one's own life if different historical and social situations call for different behavior. The deliberate emulation of a model may even become impossible if there is a sufficient disparity in psychology or circumstance. Over the course of the nineteenth century, several authors sharpened these objections to the paradigm of

---

one considers the prevalence of biographies adapted from classical sources like Plutarch, appreciations of authors and artists, lives of biblical figures and models of piety, the genre of "Hidden Lives" giving biographies of poor, unsuccessful, or forgotten people—studied by Juliette Atkinson in *Victorian Biography Reconsidered*—and the national biography project overseen by Leslie Stephens, one gets a sense of how widely circulated exemplary lives were. Alison Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), 351-87. Sally Mitchell "Review of *How to Make it as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 61.3 (December 2006), 378-81. Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth Century "Hidden" Lives*, (NYC: Oxford UP, 2010).

emulation, even while writing their own accounts of exceptional individuals; as they increasingly departed from one mode of thinking about virtue, they developed their own novel ways of theorizing and representing it.

### Skepticism and Epideixis

My argument has its earliest sources in the fundamental challenge that historicist thinking posed to ethical thinking. The form of ethical skepticism that interests me depends on a growing self-consciousness about the immanent conditions that shape history and psychology, respectively, but it is different from the kinds of skepticism that we tend to associate with either historical determinism or psychological determinism, as such. There is a moment in *Rameau's Nephew* by Denis Diderot when the older *philosophe* (“Me”) asks the debauched, endlessly distractible musician, (“Him”) why he is “so insensitive to the charms of virtue,” in spite of being such a sensitive appreciator of music. He replies with a list of different psychological speculations:

Apparently because some things need a sense I don't possess, a fiber that hasn't been vouchsafed me [...] or again, it may be that I have always lived with good musicians and bad people. [...] Of course there was something in heredity. [...] The paternal molecule must be hard and obtuse, and this wretched first molecule has affected everything else.<sup>12</sup>

He isn't doubting that there are better and worse ways to be or that someone else could figure out which is which without too much difficulty; he's just doubting that he can be held responsible, without particularly caring which determinist argument holds. But the possibility that someone can't be held responsible for the way they live can easily lead to a reassessment of what it means to evaluate what is appropriate. By conjuring up such a

---

<sup>12</sup> Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream*, trans. Leonard Tancok (NYC: Penguin, 1966), 107-8.

riotous, charming, ridiculous creature of modernity, who reads Theophrastus's studies of vice to learn how to better cover-up the vices that they expose, Diderot is intimating a deeper, more complex form of skepticism.<sup>13</sup> What if the virtues of the past can no longer be counted on in the present? What if it isn't possible to transpose one's convictions about what is good into another's situation?

Let's consider the shape that such doubts take as they emerge in attempts to articulate what is praiseworthy or blameworthy. One of the most basic expressions of ethical thinking in literature and in life is the rhetoric of praise and blame, traditionally called *epideixis*, meaning a rhetoric of *display*. There are a few ideas worth deriving from this term, because they will suggest those features of *epideixis* that are transformed in a context of ethical skepticism. In a simple sense, the rhetoric of praise and blame is a rhetoric of display because it involves the process of pointing out what is good and bad within someone's life, but also because it converts privately felt affinities and aversions into public expressions of approval or disapproval. When Aristotle theorizes *epideixis* in his *Rhetoric*, he notes that it refocalizes ethical thinking from the perspective of public or social interests, because it tends to favor those behaviors that are oriented towards other people. A disposition towards self-sacrifice, for example, may not make for a sustainably good life, but it tends to elicit praise. The public orientation of *epideixis* is reflected in its close connection to exhortation. Aristotle notes that the two have an almost chiasmic relationship: "whenever you want to praise any one, think what you would urge people to do; and when you want to urge the doing of anything, think what you would praise a man

---

<sup>13</sup> Diderot 82.

for having done.”<sup>14</sup> Because praise and blame are oriented towards the social, and because of their exhortatory tendency, they also tend to stage the ethical value of actions in an ongoing present—to represent certain behaviors from the past as felicitous in the context of the present. Aristotle also notes the presentism of epideixis, observing that “all men praise and blame in view of the state of things existing at the time, though they often find it useful also to recall the past and to make guesses at the future.”<sup>15</sup> This is a further sense in which praise and blame rhetoric is a rhetoric of display. It is helpful here to remember the terms in which John Dryden celebrated Plutarch and other historians: “they, who teach us wisdom by the surest ways [...] by the examples of the most famous men whom they record, and by the *experience* of their faults and virtues.” To praise and blame is to assert that what was virtuous or vicious in the past can be experienced as such in the present.

Because the rhetoric of praise and blame is concerned with making public and making present what is good and bad, it is a privileged site for observing the struggle between ethics and skepticism. Admiration and condemnation become more fraught when confronted with questions about the causal factors, both psychological and historical, that determine someone’s behavior. Once we begin to judge people relative to their circumstances, it gets easier to ask if what was praiseworthy in the past may not be viable or appropriate in the present, because a given disposition may not be as virtuous under new circumstances. Epideixis can dramatize ethical skepticism.

---

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, “Rhetoric” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed Richard McKeon (NYC: Modern Library, 2001), 1354; 1358.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 1335.

William Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), is an extended exercise in epideixis in which Hazlitt's psychological acuity and historical self-awareness continually lead the project into a skepticism that he can neither accept or transcend. In format, it resembles the numerous projects in collective biography published in the nineteenth century for the purpose of ethical improvement, yet its content is never so encouraging. The phrase, "the spirit of the age" was less than a decade old when Hazlitt made it the title of his book, but though the phrase was typically used to suggest the potential of the present moment, Hazlitt's book made it the name of a more bitter and melancholy condition.<sup>16</sup> *The Spirit of the Age* is a series of essays about notable figures from contemporary life, presented with no explanatory apparatus. There is a pattern, though: over and over again, the essays show how the talent, radicalism, and hope of the 1790s had been compromised, dissipated, or suppressed by the events of the intervening years. In an essay on the radical political thinker William Godwin, Hazlitt asks a question that captures the mood of the book as a whole: looking back on the initial excitement provoked by Godwin's *Enquiry*, he asks, "Were we fools then, or are we dishonest now?" How had so many seemingly remarkable individuals, entering the world at one of the most consequential moments in its history, managed to achieve so little? Were we fools to expect more, or are we in denial about the causes of their failures? Hazlitt struggles to provide an answer.

While he praises and blames various aspects of his subjects and their work, Hazlitt's attempts to synthesize his judgments lead him into a state of ambivalence about

---

<sup>16</sup> James Chandler finds the first English "analysis of the phrase" in Percy Shelley's *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1819), in a passage about how poets draw "an electric life" from the "spirit of their age." James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1998), 109.

the historical and psychological conditions that shaped their careers. Each essay resorts to a mixture of historical, psychological, and physiological explanations for the behavior of its subject. In each moment of analysis, Hazlitt brims with his usual pugnacious confidence, but his judgments never come to a smooth synthesis, suggesting a broader condition of doubt. The ambivalent, fluctuating effect reaches an extreme in his essay on Samuel Taylor Coleridge, where he wavers between celebrating Coleridge's gifts, denouncing his weaknesses, and pitying him as a victim of his historical situation. Hazlitt knows that he admires the breadth and magnitude of Coleridge's interests and learning, he is confident that Coleridge has wasted his potential, and he disdains Coleridge's turn to conservatism. Yet when he tries to explain these judgments, he has trouble reaching a conclusion about how praiseworthy and how blameworthy Coleridge is. Perhaps Coleridge merely reflects a weakness of his age. Perhaps Coleridge was too weak, too easily distracted, too desperate for approval. Or perhaps Coleridge was mangled by the pressure of his historical moment. We see Hazlitt vacillate between these attitudes, and even after the book was published, he felt compelled to add an addendum in the second edition, giving the essay one more twist in its verdict. He ends with the pitying image of Coleridge "pitching his tent upon the barren waste without, and having no abiding place nor city of refuge!"<sup>17</sup> Whether this leaves him as noble outcast or victim of his own apostasy remains unclear.

The achievement of Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age* is diagnostic. He finds the outlines of a problem by getting thwarted by it at every turn: we can evaluate someone as the product of their psychology and as a product of their historical circumstance, and reach

---

<sup>17</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age, Or, Contemporary Portraits*, fourth edition, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt (NYC: George Bell and Sons, 1894), 58-9.

various incommensurate conclusions; at the same time, the psychology of an individual is so undeniably affected by their historical situation, and the possibilities and tendencies of a period are only made manifest in the psychologies of the people who make them up. In the process of trying to assign praise and blame to his contemporaries, Hazlitt demonstrates the way that reflexivity about the contingent causes of a person's actions (and of the context in which they act) can lead to skepticism about the extent to which people have responsibility for the formation of their virtues and vices.

Crucially, though, such a skepticism isn't merely available to those who set out to analyze character—it has begun to creep into ordinary life. Elsewhere, Hazlitt argues that such a skepticism about the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness of various forms of life, various behaviors and commitments, has become a common experience, because of the extent to which historical change has become an evident and self-conscious feature within people's experiences and relationships. In his essay "On the Knowledge of Character," he argues that "The greatest misfortune that can happen among relations is a different way of bringing up," because it accentuates differences in values and commitments. Such a disparity between generations "often lets in an unwelcome daylight on the subject, and breeds schisms, coldness, and incurable heart-burnings in families."<sup>18</sup> What follows, in an anonymous third-person, is a description of the mutual incomprehension between him and his Unitarian father, and between his father and grandfather in turn. Through his own experience, Hazlitt had developed a sense that ethical evaluations depended on circumstances, and he suspected that such a skepticism about the transposability of ethical judgments must be an increasingly common

---

<sup>18</sup> William Hazlitt, "On the Knowledge of Character" in *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt in Twelve Volumes*, VI (NYC: McClure, Philips & Co, 1903), 312.

experience in the life of anyone who undergoes the repeated transformations in circumstances brought about by modernity: even dad may not be a helpful model. He expresses envy for the happiness of people untouched by such continual revolutions in lifestyle:

“Happy, much happier, are those tribes and people who are confined to the same caste and way of life from sire to son, where prejudices are transmitted like instincts, and where the same unvarying standard of opinion and refinement blends countless generations in its improgressive, everlasting mold!”<sup>19</sup>

This fantasy about the ease of a life dictated by tradition is shadowed by Hazlitt’s alienation from such certainties: note how much extravagance, how much sheer exertion, there is in his attempt to describe complacency.

In Hazlitt’s *Spirit of the Age*, a gap has opened between the rhetoric of praise and blame and ethical evaluation; in his essay “On the Knowledge of Character,” he notes the difficulty with which people shaped by different historical circumstances recognize each other’s virtues as praiseworthy. These two doubts repeat throughout the literature of the nineteenth century, often fusing into a generalized skepticism about the possibility of making transposable generalizations about what is virtuous.

In *Frankenstein*, for example, the “schisms, coldness, and incurable heart-burnings” that Hazlitt described between generations attain a sublime perfection in the

---

<sup>19</sup> This resembles later expressions of ethical skepticism as characteristic of modernity. Compare the opening line of György Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*: “Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars.” Or consider Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller,” where he writes about the devaluation of “experience that goes mouth to mouth,” a process that he calls “giving counsel,” by the disruptions of modernity. The fact that such feelings are sometimes renounced as youthful romanticism (as with Lukács) or superseded by a more systematic conceptualization of modernity does not diminish the motivating power that one can infer from the frequency and sincerity with which this moral pang is expressed in nineteenth and early-twentieth century letters. William Hazlitt, “On the Knowledge of Character” in *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt in Twelve Volumes*, VI (NYC: McClure, Philips & Co, 1903), 313. Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (Boston: MIT Press, 1971), 29. Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (NYC: Schocken, 2007), 83-4, 86.

relationship between the creature and his unwilling custodians, Victor and the cottagers. There have been many readings of *Frankenstein* that have construed the monster as a figure for modernity. He is monstrous in the original sense of the term—unprecedented in nature—and his modernity, his lack of precedent as a lifeform, shapes his ethical possibilities. His ugliness makes him incapable of realizing any ethical position that depends on forming ongoing relationships with other people, because everyone recoils from him, even unprejudiced children. At the same time, the ethical education that he receives while living alongside the cottagers proceeds independently of membership in any particular community and without the prospect of being cultivated to fill any particular role. As such, he expects ethical norms to be more perfectly ahistorical and transposable than any born-and-raised person ever could. Norms are typically adapted to circumstance in the same gradual process by which they're learned, but the creature's moral education is stark and sudden.

His narrative dramatizes the extent to which virtues can only be fully realized in conducive forms of life: it allows the creature a respite in which to develop his ideas of what is praiseworthy, only to be rejected by his living models and thwarted from realizing any of the models that he finds in literature. His encounter with Plutarch makes him feel “the greatest ardor for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice,” and “the patriarchal lives of my protectors caused these impressions to take a firm hold on my mind.”<sup>20</sup> Yet because he cannot have any role in public life, he is unable to realize either the civic virtues in Plutarch or their correspondences among the virtuous cottagers of republican Switzerland. Instead, he ludicrously tries to identify himself with Adam and

---

<sup>20</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, the 1818 text (NYC: Oxford World's Classics, 1993), 104.

then Satan, but even his imitation of Satan is a failure—he achieves some of Satan’s tenacity, but he doesn’t attempt to create a new heaven in hell (though he toys with creating a new society in South America), and the discord that he throws into Victor’s prospects of wedded bliss lacks the sophistication of Satan’s seductions. In the relationship between the monster and his potential custodians, the novel dramatizes the dread that society is producing new forms of life for which no existing virtues are adequate.

### Configuration

Yet there are hopeful responses to such ethical skepticism among authors of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is worth emphasizing how steadfastly Victorian authors retained their belief that there was a great deal to be gained by writing about praiseworthy individuals, even as they challenged the paradigm of emulation. In *England in 1819*, James Chandler recognizes some of the same doubts about the transposability of ethical claims that I describe above, but he overstates their skeptical implications for nineteenth-century authors. At one point, he provides a “broad brush illustration of Kosellek’s claim” that “as history comes to be defined by socially constituting movement and movements, moral exemplarity can no longer be understood to operate across period boundaries.”<sup>21</sup> The illustration is a quote from Hegel’s 1822 lectures on the philosophy of history: “Rulers, statesmen and nations are often advised to learn the lesson of historical experience. But what experience and history teach is this—that nations and governments have never learned anything from history or acted upon any lessons they might have

---

<sup>21</sup> Chandler 172. He’s drawing on Reinhart Kosellek. *Future’s Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. Keith Tribe. (Boston: MIT P, 1985), 114.

drawn from it.”<sup>22</sup> What Chandler does not explore are the more dynamic ways in which nineteenth-century authors attempted to make ethical exemplarity do work, in spite of period boundaries, through their attempts to form reflexive virtues that preempt ethical skepticism by incorporating self-awareness about historical and psychological contingency. For these thinkers, what is merely contingent (the historical and psychological causes of a certain situation) is what individualizes the ethical imperatives of acting in that situation.

The process of evaluating models from the past becomes part of the process of shaping one’s relationship to history. I have described the presentism of epideixis, the way in which the process of praising or blaming someone from the past can create the experience of their faults and virtues in the present. Understanding that someone is historically remote, from a context that is incommensurable with our own, makes it all the more significant that we often do feel an ineluctable sense of admiration for other people. That the admiration may not attach to anything transcendent or ahistorical makes it more revelatory of one’s own psychology and allows for a more complex set of responses than emulation. The authors in this dissertation develop sophisticated, self-reflexive ways of mediating and meditating-upon their feelings of admiration for figures from the past. In their work, epideixis becomes a two-way street, both an assertion of someone else’s praiseworthy or blameworthy character, and an occasion to explore how and why one feels that way.

I’ll refer to this self-reflexive process of simultaneously evaluating a figure from the past *and* one’s own relationship to that person as *configuration*, because it involves

---

<sup>22</sup> Chandler 172. G. F. W. Hegel. “Introduction: ‘Reason in History.’” *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 1972), 21.

figuring oneself with and through another. My understanding of this process owes a great deal to Carolyn Williams's analysis of Walter Pater. Williams argues that the ways in which Pater represents the figures in his work as emerging from a historical ground or background forms its own figure for history, "a figure for the principle of continuity that underlies all the high points of a constructed tradition." When Pater produces such a figure for the principle of continuity, it is unlike the familiar "recourse of historical narrative to organic figures of growth," which implies a more simplifying and overdetermined conception of historical relations. What Williams finds in Pater's figural representations of historical relationships is a theoretically sophisticated, flexible conception of historicism, which is developed through the same "tangle of relations" as his aestheticism.<sup>23</sup> Configuration is more narrowly a process of figuring oneself in relation to individuals, but my analysis is similarly an attempt to draw out the subtle self-historicizing dynamics within processes of representation.

Configuration puts one person into an evaluative relationship with another, but it isn't primarily oriented towards emulation. Though my designation is new, this process of configuration was explicitly theorized by authors in the nineteenth century. It even featured in works of popular scholarship dealing with two of the most venerable sources for objects of emulation: Plutarch's *Lives* and the synoptic gospels.

Consider Arthur Hugh Clough's preface to a new edition of Plutarch's *Lives*, published in 1859. Unlike Dryden, whose edition Clough was revising, Clough is quite willing to criticize Plutarch's credibility, noting his "unhistorical treatment of the subjects of his biography." What do we gain from Plutarch's rendering of them, if they aren't

---

<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989), 9, 53.

historically accurate? “If in Plutarch’s time it was too late to think of really faithful biographies, we have here the faithful record of the historical tradition of his age. This is what, in the second century of our era, Greeks and Romans *loved to believe* about their warriors and statesmen of the past.” He goes on to add that it is “a presentation of the results of Greek and Roman moral thought, delivered not under the pressure of calamity, but as they existed in ordinary times, and actuated plain-living people.”<sup>24</sup> Suspicion is counterbalanced, but not primarily by his faith that sophistication and scholarship can correct the historical record; there’s also a powerful strain of admiration for what Clough calls earlier “the golden age of philosophers” and “the best and happiest age of the great Roman imperial period.”<sup>25</sup> Plutarch becomes an object of praise in his own right, suggesting his community’s ability to gather confidence from its traditions. Clough doesn’t believe that he can look directly at the subjects of Plutarch’s *Lives* as historical persons, but he does believe that he can look back on looking back: our admiration for Plutarch’s admiration suggests the basis for a psychological continuity between ourselves and Plutarch’s *Lives*, even as the book is riddled with symptoms of our historical disconnection from the heroes whom it praises.

Self-reflexivity even comes to provide a new basis for attempts to commune with Jesus. In 1906, Albert Schweitzer judges that “the quest of the historical Jesus” has been a series of attempts to transpose the life of Jesus directly into the theological concerns of the modern scholar, each “believing that when it had found him it could bring him

---

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Hugh Clough. “Introduction.” *Plutarch's Lives*. NYC: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1912. xix-xx. My emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Clough. xvii-xviii.

straight into our time as a teacher and savior.”<sup>26</sup> For Schweitzer, every attempt to reconstruct the life of Jesus had necessarily passed through the medium of its author’s psychology, because, “a personality can only be awakened to life by a personality,” and “no vital force comes into the figure unless a man breathes into it all the hate or all the love of which he is capable.”<sup>27</sup> Schweitzer’s response to the quest for the historical Jesus was to conclude that the outward form of Jesus’s life and teachings must remain unrecoverably alien to modern believers, but to feel a psychological affinity with Jesus’s unified will towards “an ethical consummation in all things” and make that into a new basis for communing with him.<sup>28</sup> Our response to his example, needing only “a few lapidary utterances” should be enough to suggest a psychological continuity so powerful that “the differences which arise from change in the body of available thought-forms are ultimately of secondary importance, however prominent they may appear to be, for the same will, manifested in however varying circumstances, always creates world-views which comply and coincide with its own essential nature.”<sup>29</sup> In the 1890s, Oscar Wilde had already recast communion with Jesus along psychological lines towards different ends, but the fact that a Lutheran theologian could argue that our primary means for communing with Jesus was by recognizing a psychological affinity, rather than as either a moral teacher or an object of historical scholarship, suggests the extent to which configuration had become part of the process by which people expected to improve when they looked to exemplars from the past.

---

<sup>26</sup> Albert Schweitzer. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Trans. W. Montgomery, J. R. Coates, Susan Cupitt, and John Bowden. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 478.

<sup>27</sup> Schweitzer 6-7.

<sup>28</sup> Schweitzer 482.

<sup>29</sup> Schweitzer 480-1.

Such a process of configuration is more contingent and more unstable than the paradigm of emulation. Where admiration surmounts historical discontinuity, it seems to testify to the possibility of an edifying and mutually validating relationship between the two figures involved. Yet it only gains that revelatory quality in a context of recognized contingency, when there is no ahistorical, necessary connection between feelings of admiration or aversion and a generally recognizable realm of ethical norms.

As a rhetorical mode, configuration can provide a basis for representing or even enacting one's relationship to history, but it carries with it a set of ambiguities that shape its role in forming the moral psychology of historicism. To assert one's admiration for someone is to claim a kind of tautology or self-evidence, to say: I feel an affinity for this person—I can participate in the ethical perspective from which they are praiseworthy. The philosopher Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski and the literary critic Catherine Gallagher have both shown how the act of pointing at someone as praiseworthy or desirable can precede and ground a more abstract ethical theorization. Zagzebski's *Exemplarist Moral Theory* is built on the Putnam-Kripke direct-reference theory from semantics, the claim that the connection between words and concepts is merely causal, as opposed to being supported by necessary criteria for the concept. (So, for example, the meaning of the word water comes from people pointing at and using water, long before they develop any criteria for defining water as a substance.) The implication of bringing this theory to ethics is that we can develop ethical concepts from pointing at exemplary individuals that we admire, and then deriving those virtues that make them exemplary. In her classic essay "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," Catherine Gallagher analyzes the way that Eliot's characterization pivots between pointing outwards towards a set of real-world

examples and pointing internally towards the constructed particularity of its characters. She argues that Eliot's narration converts the necessary invocation of the particular into an occasion for desire that acts as an engine for its ethics.<sup>30</sup> Each of these studies captures something crucial about the way in which morality is animated for people by particularity, rather than abstraction. Yet their differences are revealing, with Zagzebski ministering to philosophical disinterest and Gallagher ministering to eros. Taken together, they remind us of the rest of admiration, the unstable cluster of interrelated feelings that lie between abstract, disinterested *approval* at one extreme, and *desire* that drives towards some definite end, at the other.

There are reasons why this amorphous realm of admiration has been undertheorized, which are worth observing because those difficulties are what configuration has to manage. Moral philosophers have been nearly unanimous in their suspicion of admiration, and for consistent reasons.<sup>31</sup> Admiration isn't abstract enough to safely inform ethical judgments. It's vulnerable to a variety of prejudices and self-deceptions: we tend to prefer people who remind us of ourselves, we tend to favor people who are successful or prominent and underestimate the role of luck in success, and we tend to take vicarious pleasure from people who are powerful and carefree. These are the same concerns that lead Socrates to recoil at the admiration that people feel for the Homeric heroes—if poets can make people admire someone like Achilles, maybe they can't be trusted. Admiration is just the sort of affective, ad hoc, unsystematic evaluation against which philosophy has traditionally defined itself as a corrective.

---

<sup>30</sup> Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. NYC: Oxford UP, 2017. Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," *Representations* 90 (2005), 61-74.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. T. H. Irwin. "Nil Admirari? Uses and Abuses of Admiration." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* LXXXIX (2015) 223-48.

Admiration becomes even more unruly once our ability to assess other people's virtues is thrown into doubt. If exemplary individuals could be viewed as models for stable, ahistorical virtues, then perhaps admiration could be confined to motivating a person to emulate them—the admiration would be both elicited and exhausted by the apprehension of the virtue. But admiration can easily entail a wider range of feelings when they aren't attached to something abstract and definite. Consider, for example, how Hazlitt's ambivalent feelings about Coleridge as a public figure are tied up with his own complicated feelings about Coleridge as a former friend.<sup>32</sup>

Literary critics haven't had much to say about admiration either, and I suspect that we have the opposite problem: for us, admiration isn't sufficiently concrete. To say that I admire someone may mean that I want to emulate them, but not necessarily; may mean that I trust them, but not necessarily; may mean that I wish them to have more power or prestige, but not necessarily. It isn't always possible to say that admiration wants anything in particular. At many points in the course of this dissertation, admiration will partake of erotic desire, but always with rigors and rewards that cannot be reduced to desire or its ostensible object.

The ambiguities of admiration make configuration a mode that is especially valuable for drawing out changing assumptions about the moral psychology of

---

<sup>32</sup> Hazlitt thematizes this as a broader challenge for assessing his contemporaries, who cannot be apprehended with either the detachment or the easy admiration afforded by historical distance. As Jonah Siegel notes, "the valuation of the artist in the nineteenth century depended on maintaining a difficult balance between fascination and repulsion; the increasing desire to learn more about authors led to a preoccupation with their lives, which often threatened to undermine the very qualities supporting their status in culture." Part of the appeal of configuring oneself with historically remote individuals is that it allows for a selectiveness about the form of the affinity that one feels and, perhaps, greater control over the implications of that affinity. But repulsion often haunts the process of configuration and sometimes takes possession of it. Jonah Siegel, *Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth Century Culture of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000), 112; 96.

historicism, because one can scarcely invoke admiration as a feature of one's argument without needing to convey how one intends to harness it and how one intends to delimit its role. The paradigm of emulation has an elegantly limited use for admiration: become the thing you admire, convert an indexical relationship (attending to an exemplary individual) into a relationship of resemblance. It's more complicated with configuration. Discovering some affinity for another person in spite of one's awareness of the larger contingencies of history can feel revelatory. But there is no self-evident response to such a feeling. Carlyle's hero-worshiper, for example, attains to the same simplifying feeling of sincerity that his heroes have, but imitation is not an option, and there may not be any heroes who have any direct bearing on the hero-worshiper's life—Carlyle certainly couldn't find any in the last decades of his life. Because there is no singular way of managing the disparate and sometimes conflicting entanglements and motivations involved in configuration, the changing ways in which people do so give us a useful way of analyzing their conception of moral psychology.<sup>33</sup> The authors under discussion in this dissertation all made explicit theorizations about ethics, while also producing work in narrative, poetic, theatrical, and other literary modes that show what complications they encountered in attempting to give shape to their apprehension of our ethical prospects.

The modes of configuration enacted by Thomas Carlyle's hero-worship, George Eliot's

---

<sup>33</sup> My concept of configuration owes a lot to Andrew Miller's formulation about perfectionism in nineteenth-century ethical thinking—that it operates by converting skepticism into second-person relationships—as well as to Stanley Cavell's writings on acknowledgment and avoidance. The most significant difference between Miller's project and my own is that I'm focused on the various ways in which configuration ends or breaks-off and on rigors and demands that fall beyond the paradigm of perfectionism. Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2008). Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging" and "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*" in *Must we Mean What We Say?*, updated edition (NYC: Cambridge, UP, 2002), 238-356. "Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance" in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (NYC: Oxford UP, 1999), 329-476.

use of typologies, or Walter Pater's appreciations are open-ended and oriented towards an other, although not in the same spirit. They are particular ways of relating to other people that model ways of relating to history.

The aspiration to find a moral psychology adequate to historicism tended to produce works that are anomalous in their use of genre and mode—texts like *Sartor Resartus*, *Aurora Leigh*, or even *Middlemarch*—so the history of reflexive theories of virtue is also a study of changing beliefs about what literary form could or should be expected to do. By drawing out the tensions between theoretical elegance and the complications that emerge in literary representation, my hope is to embrace the full complexity with which literary authors in the nineteenth century attempted to represent the relationship of individual psychology to history. As Harry Shaw says, in a description of Erich Auerbach's method, "reality resides in specific moments and local textures."<sup>34</sup> If we find, in their expressions of admiration, some subtle intermingling of desire, some retreat from guilt or anxiety, some unspoken need, we won't have undermined their ideas, but simply come closer to tracing their operation. Our authors give us critical distance by never living up to their most exacting claims.

My choice of subjects was primarily guided by this method of focusing on authors that supplemented self-conscious theorizing with a wider range of representational techniques. All of the authors under consideration here were engaged with philosophical traditions in which virtue is theorized, not only the tradition of Christian ethics, but also classical traditions, like Aristotelian ethics. They also all engaged with literary traditions oriented towards the representation of exemplary individuals, such as Plutarch's *Lives*, a

---

<sup>34</sup> Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999), 114.

study of virtuous individuals, or Theophrastus's *Characters*, a study of vicious ones.

They were also all engaged with each other: this is a sequence of authors in which each was aware of all of the previous ones, and several directly respond to each other's work.

Chapter one, part one shows how Thomas Carlyle's writings on what he calls heroes and hero-worship influentially respond to historicism by reinterpreting the flux of history as an opportunity to find a radically individuating sense of vocation. I argue that his theory of heroism introduces a radical ethical paradigm in which the highest standard of the good life is to realize the relationship between one's psychology and one's historical situation. Heroism is, in part, defined by an ability to make departures from existing norms, but Carlyle conceives of these disjunctions as being occasioned by a radically simplifying sense of obligation. Hero-worship is presented as a preparation for heroism (that is, as a mode of configuration), but it's clear that, for the vast majority of people, it's a substitute. The narrative template and the rhetorical devices that Carlyle uses to represent heroism are designed to foreshorten the encounter with history into a simplifying experience of duty. While Carlyle is often associated with the reception of the *Bildungsroman* in Britain as the translator of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, I argue that his conception of heroism offered an alternative template for imagining the process by which people adjust themselves to their historical moment, one which foreshortens its account of youth and development to give the accession to the demands of one's situation the quality of revelation.

Chapter one, part two reads John Stuart Mill's essays on Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a response to Carlyle's influence. These essays convert their subjects into patterns for what Mill considers to be the two most important intellectual

dispositions of the period, making them into a sort of virtual clerisy. This strategy allows Mill to engage some of the rhetorical and associative power of configuring one's relationship to history with reference to exemplary individuals, while still subordinating that process to the proving ground of public discourse. I argue that this technique of using configuration to identify and celebrate some unfinished cultural or intellectual project becomes a template for the critical practice of "recovering" authors in F. R. Leavis's republication of these essays.

Chapter two shows how Elizabeth Barrett Browning represents a multifaceted, labile present within the framework of historicism. Where Carlyle's approach to history had prized a simplifying sense of vocation informed by a spirit of eschatological urgency, Barrett Browning's vision of the present is assembled from the varied, incommensurate ways in which people's feelings unfold in time. In part one, I argue that the idea of "double vision" in the *ars poetica* of *Aurora Leigh* is the culmination of an ongoing attempt to manage the historicity of feeling, the way in which feelings have their own temporality. In order to represent a feeling at a temporal remove, Barrett Browning develops what I refer to as desynchronization effects. This poetic strategy displaces the aspiration towards identification that exists in precursors like Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon in favor of a dialectic between intimacy and estrangement. I read Part One of *Casa Guidi Windows*, her poem about the Italian uprisings of 1848, as achieving what *Aurora Leigh* describes in her definition of double vision, a rediscovery of the possibilities of the present, by attending to the latent feelings of intimacy in public life. In part two of this chapter, I argue that Barrett Browning's relationship to the present is ultimately more suspicious and uneasy than the explicit definition of double vision

suggests. Starting with Part Two of *Casa Guidi Windows*, she explores the need to actively resist one's sympathies for other people. I reconsider the way that Aurora's definition of "double-vision" fits into the larger *ars poetica* and *Aurora Leigh* as a whole to argue that Barrett Browning's poetics ultimately require both a rediscovery and reestrangement of the present in her attempt to manage the multiple modes in which we affect and are affected by other people.

Chapter three shows how George Eliot attempts to adapt sympathy into a reflexive virtue for acceding to the limitations of one's sociohistorical situation as it is manifested in one's relations. Eliot's ethical thinking has been celebrated for its pleasures and its historicist sophistication, but we derive a richer sense of the way in which it develops a moral psychology for historicism by attending to its sacrificial, self-disciplining temper and its attempts to offer simulations of transcendence. In part one, I argue that Eliot is less concerned with expanding one's sympathies than with balancing multiple sympathies, a process that accentuates the limitations of one's sociohistorical situation. *Romola* serves as a particularly schematic demonstration of this process of configuration, because it unfolds in a context in which different relationships suggest affinities with the rival traditions of Catholicism and humanism. Furthermore, the novel's split-focus on the villainous Tito and the heroine Romola lets it draw an extended distinction between sympathy as an experience of shared sentiment (something Tito often feels) and as a reflexive virtue (something Romola develops through a variety of conflicting relationships). Finally, I argue that the novel adapts her theory of tragedy to show how contradictory and incommensurate relationships to history can not only coexist, but may ultimately be mutually constitutive.

In part two, I argue that Eliot develops a psychologized form of typology within her novels that simulates a compensatory experience of historical transcendence. Typology is the interpretive practice of reading an individual or event as a repetition of an earlier one. By having the characters in *Middlemarch* continually interpret each other as repetitions of historical types, they can take on the limitations of their circumstances with a degree of detachment, while the historical specificity of their references lets the novel reinforce their position within historical processes that supersede them. *Daniel Deronda*, increasingly attentive to the subtle forms of coercion that travel with sympathy, features characters that participate in the process of interpreting themselves and each other with reference to historical types, but with a degree of defensiveness and anxiety that suggests an increasing discomfort with the idea of being reduced to one's role in history and an even more cautious, conflictual relationship to sympathy. Eliot's last book, *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* makes a departure from her earlier work, recasting typological thinking in and as anachronistic artifice.

Chapter four shows how Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde's concepts of "self-culture" and "the critical spirit" break with earlier attempts to find a felicitous relationship between self and historical situation. Where earlier theories of reflexive virtue had been oriented towards adapting oneself to one's historical moment, Pater makes a Copernican revolution and theorizes a reflexive virtue that adapts history for the cultivation of one's psyche. Rather than holding oneself to a singular vocation, Pater proposes that one should engage aspects of human history in order to cultivate different parts of one's psyche through a series of imaginative relationships with praiseworthy individuals. Wilde eschews Pater's emphasis on balance and wholeness but follows him

in prioritizing individual psychology in his vision of the good life. For Wilde, our encounters with exemplary others are valuable insofar as they act as provocations in an ongoing process of self-estrangement. All reflexive theories of virtue are open-ended, insofar as they make ethics relative to situation, but Pater and Wilde make open-endedness a good-in-itself, with our capacity to undergo continual cultivation or transformation the essence of the good life.

While this project has a doubled historical element in that it looks back to the ways in which an earlier period itself looked to the past, my argument may be understood, in part, as an attempt to draw out the still underexplored relationship between ethics and the historicism that shapes so much work done in the field today. The attempt to formulate reflexive virtues by articulating the interaction between history and psychology is homologous to the project of critical theory as it emerges in the nineteenth and twentieth century, and can thus be thought of as a more openly exhortatory compliment to many of our current critical methods. A major strand in what literary scholars call critical theory consists of attempts to connect immanent causal accounts of history and psychology without making one reducible to the other. That aspiration conditions much of the most influential work by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, W. E. B. DuBois, and later Sigmund Freud. Ideology, interpellation, mythologies, genealogies, epistemes, structures of feeling, social energies, cognitive mapping, the political unconscious, and many other critical constructs all operate as modes for conceptualizing how those two causal and agential scales interact with each other. Like reflexive theories of virtue, these concepts enable interpretive and evaluative judgments by articulating certain forms of life as contingencies, rather than as

mere inevitabilities, incorporating the open and reconstructive process of giving causal accounts on multiple scales. What distinguishes reflexive theories of virtue is that they give greater prominence to exhortation, to asserting how an individual might recognize what their situation calls for them to do. My hope is that by activating the affinity that exists between reflexive theories of virtue and the background assumptions of contemporary literary criticism—i.e., their shared investment in asserting value claims within a recognized context of contingency—it will become possible to more directly articulate and theorize what we hope to accomplish with the exhortatory moves and moralized methods of argumentation that remain largely implicit in literary criticism.

### 1.1: Thomas Carlyle's Heroes

Thomas Carlyle's writing provided one of the major forms in which Anglophone writers of the nineteenth century learned to think about themselves as historically situated. Many authors can claim some credit for contributing to the increasing historical sophistication in the intellectual life of the period. What makes Carlyle's instruction distinct, is that his interpretation of historical causality turns the impersonal forces by which history moves into occasions for a recognition of personal vocation. By emphasizing the inscrutability of historical causation, he presents the response to one's immediate historical situation as the only realm of coherence in human life.

We can see how Carlyle recasts history in terms of the recognition of one's personal vocation in the shift between his essays "On History" and "On History Again." The earlier essay observes that "the writer fitted to compose History is hitherto an unknown man," and though he claims that "History is the essence of innumerable Biographies," this appeal to a more easily circumscribed genre provides no simplification, because "our own Biography [...] remains in so many points unintelligible."<sup>1</sup> In his second essay on history, he has abandoned the earlier essay's prospect of viewing history in the third person. Rather than imagining history as the essence of innumerable biographies, he imagines it as shaped by "memoirs" as it unfolds through the effects of its participants interpreting their own relationship to history (XV.79-82). It may well be that history is unfathomable, but this hasn't prevented people in the past from coming to see themselves as having certain prospects and obligations in their part of it; there is no reason not to aspire to such confidence for our own part. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle. "On History." *Carlyle's Complete Works*. NYC: Lovell, 1869. Vol. XIV. 62. All subsequent references to Carlyle will be made by volume and page number.

sense that we are historically situated could be taken to mean that we are cut off from the edification and encouragement that we might gain from the examples of the past, adrift in an impersonal play of forces that destabilizes all ethical pretensions. The signature effort of Carlyle's writing is to teach his readers to see their historical situatedness as the occasion for a most personal recognition of their prospects and obligations. The name that he gave that mode of self-reflexivity is heroism.

It would feel perverse to say that Carlyle has a "mature period," because he gets more petulant with age, but the historical works that he wrote in the late 1830s and early 1840s, particularly *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* and *Past and Present*, do the best job of representing how people might achieve the ethical aspirations that he articulates in his earlier work. The result doesn't resemble a typical ethical theory, so much as a training in the recognition of what Carlyle refers to as "heroism," a simplifying commitment to realizing what one is called upon to do, occasioned by a radically individuating sense of historical situatedness. Carlyle begins urging his readers to face the confusion of life with a sense of duty near the beginning of his career—it is on this note that he ends "Signs of the Times," for example (XIII.487). What we find in Carlyle's writings of the late 30s and early 40s is not a rigorous system for matching individual psychology to historical situation, but rather formal techniques through which he attempts to represent the possibility of such a felicitous relationship between self and situation. Carlyle's discourse of heroism provides a starting point for several other thinkers, and thus, listening to Carlyle makes it much easier to hear the note of exhortation and moralism that has a subtler presence in the work of subsequent writers who still make ethical claims within the contingencies of history and psychology, but without his vatic confidence. Carlyle

epitomizes the aspiration that criticism can teach people to feel radically compelled by a recognition of themselves as historically situated.

### Why the Hero Stuff?

Carlyle's influence on other authors is too great for him to fade from the study of Victorian literature, but the hateful politics of his later years and his longeurs are discouraging. Victorianists have largely voted with their feet: certain aspects of his work have continued to act as stand-ins for his considerable influence on the Victorian novel, and *Sartor Resartus* has proven too formally intriguing to resist, but his writings on heroism and hero-worship haven't had as much sympathetic consideration.<sup>2</sup> Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-Worship* tends to be read through its last essay, "The Hero as King," through the authoritarianism of his later years, and through his labored celebration of Frederick the Great.<sup>3</sup> As such, literary critics have tended to view Carlyle's theories of

---

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in 2013, when *Heroes and Hero-Worship* was reprinted as part of Yale University Press's "Rethinking the Western Tradition" series, one its editors lamented that the book was little read, and that even Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*—"the boldest and most successful attempt to revive Carlyle's standing as a prophet"—had treated *Heroes and Hero-Worship* as the beginning of Carlyle's decline as a thinker (1). In the years since this new edition, Carlyle's writings on heroism haven't received the kind of renewed attention that its editors and contributors had hoped for. As for the introduction and the new essays bundled with Carlyle's text, they are necessarily constrained to retailing the magnitude of Carlyle's impact in the period and suggesting Carlyle's relevance to a range of other topics of interest to contemporary scholars. David R. Sorensen, "Introduction," *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Ed. David Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> This reinterpretation of Carlyle's heroism and hero-worship in terms of his later authoritarianism began in his lifetime. In *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill argues for the salutary influence of exceptional individuals on ordinary people, but adds, "I am not countenancing the sort of 'hero-worship' which applauds the strong man of genius for forcibly seizing on the government of the world and making it do his bidding in spite of itself" (66-7). But Mill's reaction to *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* itself had been far more favorable. In a letter to Robert Barclay Fox, he says of that book, "I quite agree with you as to his Lectures. That little book contains almost all his best ideas in a particularly attractive shape, & with many explanations he has not given elsewhere or has given only by way of allusion" (475). In fact, the way that Mill describes the influence of great individuals on average ones in *On Liberty* resembles the way in which Carlyle argues that everyone can be heroic: "The honor and glory of the average man is that he is capable of following that initiative; that he can respond internally to wise and noble things, and be led to them with his eyes open" (66). John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty and Other Writings*. Ed. Stefan Collini. NYC: U of

heroism and hero-worship as an early symptom of his decline into the intellectually inert authoritarianism of later essays like “Shooting Niagara.”

Raymond Williams gives an incisive version of the case that Carlyle’s hero-worship is simply the first act of his authoritarianism. What is valuable in Carlyle is his critique of the impoverishing effects that modern political economy has had on social relationships, but because his radical critique of modern society makes him feel cut off, he becomes desirous of the power that could enable him to realize what he takes to be his higher insight; as a result, “he construes the generally desirable as what he personally desires; he creates the image of the hero, ‘the strong man who stands alone,’ the leader, the leader possessed by vision, who shall be listened to, revered, obeyed.” Williams is unwilling to reduce this tendency in Carlyle’s thought to a symptom of his psychology, noting that a similar tendency has been “general,” but he takes Carlyle’s turn to heroism as a tragic fall from his potential as a social thinker.<sup>4</sup>

Yet if we remember how much of *Heroes and Hero-Worship* is taken up with more indirect exercises of agency, to say nothing of its investment in noble suffering, it becomes apparent that his conception of heroism offers something different from either the urgent diagnosis of social ills that Williams values in “Signs of the Times,” “Characteristics,” and *Chartism* or the authoritarianism of his latter-day screeds.

Williams is right that Carlyle’s appeals to heroism are attempts to imagine transformative agency; but, more particularly, they are attempts to secure a place for individual agency within a dialectical view of history, a view of history in which the

---

Cambridge P, 1989. John Stuart Mill. “Letter to Robert Barclay Fox (6<sup>th</sup> May 1841). *The Earlier Letters: 1812-1848*. From The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XIII. Ed. Francis E Mineka.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams. *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*. NYC: Columbia UP, 1958. 76-7.

ethical meaning of a given human action can be radically transformed from one moment to another. Carlyle not only allows for various kinds of historical influence to remain incommensurate with each other, but comes to conceive of ethical behavior as something that can only emerge through an individual's relationship with their historical situation. In its articulations from the late 30s and early 40s, heroism is the form in which Carlyle develops his relativism about ethical action, not an appeal to brute force.

Nor is Carlyle alone in having a complicated fascination with radical, disjunctive transformations. Elisa Tamarkin's fascinating essay "Why Forgive Carlyle?," acknowledges the appeal of Carlyle's transgressive vitality, even as she ultimately dismisses him. It is a meditation on what it means to judge a matter as relevant or irrelevant. The titular question becomes a proxy for considering why and how people decide that a person's failings—like writing a virulently racist and authoritarian pro-slavery pamphlet, for example—are irrelevant enough that one can forgive them. Her argument is that forgiveness is a convex view in which certain aberrations are deemed irrelevant as they're dispersed beyond the edge of focus. In Tamarkin's essay, the feature of Carlyle that comes to epitomize his capacity to elicit forgiveness for his offences is his laugh. This is obviously not a direct explanation of why so many of Carlyle's personal correspondents forgave his politics, let alone his readers, given that so many of them would never have heard his laugh. Instead, it makes Carlyle the embodiment of a disjunctive vitality that Tamarkin takes to be self-evidently appealing, a vitality that she associates with Henri Bergson and with what Jacques Derrida called "the anti-conformist burst of laughter" of his friend Paul de Man. The disjunctive vitality of laughter becomes, for Tamarkin, a prime example of what she takes to be the undecidability of the moment

of forgiveness.<sup>5</sup> In Tamarkin's essay, we see the clash between two powerful tendencies in contemporary criticism: on the one hand, a bias in favor of all things that can be described as disjunctive, a bias that lingers from the poststructuralists of the last century and their familiars; on the other hand, our feeling of an inescapable moral imperative to confront the abhorrent racism and authoritarian politics of Carlyle's later writing, recognizably horrible even for its day.

If, like Tamarkin, we are interested in ethically evaluating the actions of individuals, and we are drawn to the prospect of radical transformations, then our investments are much closer to Carlyle's thinking on heroism than we have tended to acknowledge. Her essay's concluding lines, "Why forgive Carlyle? // Carlyle is irrelevant" suggest that, for us, it is Carlyle-entire that should be pushed beyond the edge of our focus, an unrecoverable aberration.<sup>6</sup> The problem with the essay's expulsion of its ostensible subject is that Tamarkin doesn't say more about how distinctly Carlylean was the kind of forgiveness that he elicited. As we will see in what follows, Carlyle attempts to train his readers to see what is uniquely imperative for a given hero precisely by dramatizing the process through which we set aside our misgivings about that individual. Coming to recognize another person's heroism becomes the anticipatory analog for preparing to recognize our own heroic vocation. As such, Carlyle's rhetoric may deal in irony and disjunction, but only to usher in new attachments. This is not the permanent parabasis of deconstructive irony, but rather a disjunction that is confirmed precisely by

---

<sup>5</sup> There is a tradition of connecting Thomas Carlyle with Bergsonian vitalism, a collocation developed in Eric Bentley's study of hero-worship. Elisa Tamarkin. "Why Forgive Carlyle?" *Representations*. 134.1 (Spring 2016). 78-9. Eric Bentley, *A Century of Hero-Worship*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 35; 68; 259.

<sup>6</sup> Tamarkin 87.

finding a new attachment. Carlyle's rhetoric of radical transformation is worthy of consideration for the way that it casts a shadow on the old deconstructive faith in disjunction, showing well enough that not all disjunctions are subversive, and not all subversions are liberating.

In what follows, I will argue that Carlyle's conception of heroism is suggestive for the way that it struggles to find a felicitous relationship between individual agency and the various forms of worldly power, and, what's more, that the difficulties that emerge remain ominous for any attempt to identify prospects for radical social transformation and simultaneously to exhort individuals to realize them. In Carlyle we find an early articulation of the potential for self-reflexivity to actively reshape the possibilities of ethical life, because Carlyle was willing to countenance a radical defiance towards society's establish values, and because he sanctifies the single-minded assertion of a vocation as a participation in the original creative energies of the cosmos.

### Skepticism and Configuration in Early Carlyle

Much of Carlyle's early writing is energized by the sense that ethical judgments aren't transposable—that what is appropriate at one historical moment will not be at another, that what one person is entitled to do, others are not. Yet Carlyle hastens to cast these differences as instances of the higher demands of a natural order that transcends the formulas by which we mortals approximate its laws—what could have been seen as a source of skepticism about our ability to make any stable ethical judgments becomes, instead, the personal call of a sublime cosmic order. To recapture the skeptical element in Carlyle's thinking, we will have to infer it from his recoil, from the avidity with which he

celebrates Reality in his essay on biography. Then, by analyzing the intrusion of biography into *Sartor Resartus*, a commentary on a fictional work of German philosophy, we will be able to further develop the way that biography provides a narrative template for giving an individual coherence and a vocational energy to Carlyle's engagement with historical relativism.

Carlyle's investment in the "Reality" of history is stirred up by his anxiety about the impersonal forces that influence an individual's psychology. He implies that the realized coherence of the individual psychology is the standard of reality by articulating the traditional opposition between history and fiction (to fiction's detriment) in his essay on "Biography," rather than in his essays "On History" or "On History Again." In one of those passages where Carlyle attributes some of his more severe ruminations to a fictional German, he says, "Imagination is, after all, but a poor matter when it has to part company with Understanding, and even front it hostilely in flat contradiction. Our mind is divided in twain: there is contest; wherein that which is weaker must needs come to the worse" (XIV.389). To entertain fictions without attaching them to some real conviction is to divide the mind in two, in such a way as to introduce arbitrariness into its working. To tarry with fiction, then, is not even to risk being deceived, but to risk being divided.

Where fiction develops bad dispositions and introduces an element of arbitrariness into our ethical development, biography can be put forward as the wholesome, improving alternative. What Carlyle fears is a relationship to fiction in which we become accustomed to half-accepting fantasies that "please only a portion of man's mind, not the whole thereof" (XVI.389). It is for this reason that Carlyle's condemnation of fiction has exemptions for anything that can elicit whole-hearted belief, whether it be

the mythologies and epics that enthralled the minds of our ancient ancestors or, one supposes, his puppet-show of German philosophers. Carlyle has a special horror of the impersonal forces that divide a mind against itself and render the outcome an arbitrary result of momentary strength, and he believes, plausibly enough, that we are more likely to stimulate those inner conflicts in the promiscuous possibilities of fiction. Carlyle makes biography and configuration the central modes of his career so that, by depicting and judging what is consistent in other people, readers (and the author) can reaffirm what is solid in themselves and find a meaningful sense of vocation and agency.

In *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle's first extended meditation on the disjunctions between the norms and necessities of different moments in history, the power of biography for Carlyle's thought emerges in the generic battleground of the text itself, where an account of the book's fictional subject displaces and then provides a new basis for the philosophical exegesis that surrounds it. *Sartor Resartus* presents itself as a series of review-essays on the work of a German Idealist philosopher, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (God-given devil's dung), who writes a treatise on clothing, in which the stuff of history, its events and conventions, are presented as so many changes of clothing. The implications of this exercise in historical relativism are variously mordant, incisive, awe-struck. The reviewer makes a turn from his overview of Teufelsdröckh's Philosophy of Clothes to an account of Teufelsdröckh's life after a consideration of the pervasiveness of Force in the universe, a consideration that attempts to recover some sense of coherent agency and identity. The reviewer quotes Teufelsdröckh asking his readers, "knowest thou any corner of the world where at least FORCE is not? [...] Thinkest thou there is aught motionless; without Force, and utterly dead?" Teufelsdröckh introduces the thought

of division as an unprompted non sequitur, only to dismiss it: “Detached, separated! I say there is no such separation.” If everything can be the object of a causal account, Teufelsdröckh will attempt to redeem this condition of being acted-upon as a connection to the universal and the ideal: “Nay, if you consider it, what is Man himself, and his whole terrestrial Life, but an Emblem; a Clothing or visible Garment for that divine ME of his, cast hither, like a light-particle, down from Heaven?” (I.54-5). Man is not the passive victim of causality, but fused into the working of the universe. This is the confident testimony of the mature Teufelsdröckh, but Carlyle’s reviewer isn’t willing to settle with the faith that each Earthly individual is the reiteration of the divine *I* that is the creative force of the universe.

Instead, he spends the next volume of the book taking a special interest in the Earthly individuality of Teufelsdröckh himself, giving bashful sympathy to the philosopher’s sorrows. The justification for this turn comes from the reviewer’s contact in Teufelsdröckh’s home of Weissnichtwo, who urges him to trace the shaping forces of the universe into the formation of Teufelsdröckh’s philosophy: where some ideas can appear to spring directly from someone’s head, a life-philosophy must be the product of someone’s character, and thus it won’t be properly understood “till the Author’s View of the World (*Weltansicht*), and how he actively and passively came by such view, are clear.” Such a causal account is so crucial that one may have to let Fancy fill in the gaps until “either in the authentic lineaments of Fact, or the forged ones of Fiction, a complete picture and Genetical History of the Man and his spiritual Endeavor lies before you” (I.57-8). Here, as in Carlyle’s essay on “Biography,” the highest standard for truth is that it be salutary for the unity and coherence of the human mind. Whatever encouragement

there is to find in Teufelsdröckh's philosophy, Carlyle hopes to realize its transformative potential by converting it into a displaced and fragmentary memoir.

The turn to biography preserves the homology between an individual person and the workings of the creative force within nature: by insisting that there is something inscrutable and mystical in the formation of Teufelsdröckh's character, as in the passage from one epoch to another, it implies that his character is irreducible to the causes and effects with which it nonetheless interacts. Though the reviewer's contact tells him that he has the materials to assemble Teufelsdröckh's autobiography, what the reviewer actually receives is an inscrutable set of parcels full of papers that freely intermingle philosophy with glimpses of Teufelsdröckh's biography; the parcels are marked with signs of the zodiac, as if to suggest some esoteric key, but the reviewer can find nothing more than chaos in the arrangement of the materials (I.59-60). In the reviewer's reconstruction of Teufelsdröckh's biography, cause and effect still matters—we can see the course of his life affected by unrequited love, for example—but only to present Teufelsdröckh as a whole acted upon, and then responding to, various influences. It is the irreducibility of an individual's psychology to the outward causes of their personal history that rescues the coherence of the self. Carlyle, as always, views the world through the tussle of action and reaction, but individual psychology must remain as mystical as the deep sources of change within the larger universe.

It is the turn to biography that recasts Teufelsdröckh's transcendental philosophy as a search for a personal vocation, and it does this by recasting the encounter with the natural order as an encounter with an anthropomorphized time-spirit. The book's many time-hyphenations (time-spirit, time-prince, etc.) begin after the turn to biography, and

the capitalized references to Time are concentrated in sections after the turn to biography.<sup>7</sup> In “Getting Under Way,” the chapter that concerns the beginning of Teufelsdröckh’s philosophical work after his departure from school, there is a particularly suggestive swarm of references to capitalized “Time,” twelve in nine sentences, with Teufelsdröckh addressing Time as a devourer and an imprisoner, but also as the “Time-Element” in which people exist and the “Time-impulse” that enables the “Movement” of our existence. Though he is inclined to characterize Time as a devil, he also refers to himself as a “Son of Time” (I.99). It is by conceiving of Time as a being with personality, a provoker, that Teufelsdröckh arrives at the first glimmers of his transcendental Clothes Philosophy (that is, his historical relativism); but it is also by staging such an encounter that Carlyle introduces the note of personal vocation that will be so central to both Teufelsdröckh’s philosophical conversion experience, as well as Carlyle’s thinking more generally. He translates Teufelsdröckh’s meditation on the battle with all-devouring time by saying, “in the dialect of this lower world, that Teufelsdröckh’s whole duty and necessity was, like other men’s, to work,—in the right direction” (I.99). When Teufelsdröckh declares his “Everlasting Yea,” his philosophical conversion experience, he concludes that our common “internecine warfare with the Time-spirit” should necessarily make all lowly “Contention” seem ridiculous (I.147). The Clothes Philosophy may hearken after the eternal through the changeable, but vocation still arises in a world of personalities, with Time itself anthropomorphized as both progenitor and adversary of all human endeavors. Biography is the cause, the medium, and the model by which

---

<sup>7</sup> In particular, “time-spirit” only appears in the heavily biographical Volume Two (I.66; 99; 147), where it provides a guise in which Teufelsdröckh can directly address the transformative processes of time.

Carlyle transforms an Idealist metaphysics into an ethic built around humans finding their vocation in a world where all values are subject to mutability.

Carlyle's fixation on biography, then, was not a late development, marking his abandonment of social thinking, but was present from the start, and provided a mechanism by which he could flexibly describe the variety of relationships that people have to historical circumstance. Raymond Williams complains that, in Carlyle's "imaginative recreation of men of noble power [...], we enter a social contract with a biography,"<sup>8</sup> what he takes to be an abandonment of social thinking. There will be more to say about Carlyle's inability to transition from his retrospective exercises in configuration to a social theory that could work prospectively, but his investment in biography is a reasonable response to the central goals of his project, not a departure. By anthropomorphizing our relationship to time as an encounter with the Time-Spirit, Carlyle hopes to allow for individuals to recognize radical transformations in themselves, like Teufelsdröckh's philosophical conversion experience, without sacrificing the coherence of their selves to an impersonal play of historical forces. Configuration allows for a radical shift in the way that people view themselves—as in the recognition of an affinity with someone—while reasserting the coherence of each party as a person. His attention to interpersonal relationships and individual biographies will not contribute rigor or coherence to his theory, but it will provide the formal repertoire out of which he will construct his rhetoric of heroism and hero-worship.

Carlyle's heroism calls on individuals to resist excessive self-consciousness and subordinate themselves to the demands of their historical circumstance, but it should

---

<sup>8</sup> Williams 77.

already be apparent that a self-reflexive appeal to individual psychology has intruded into his austere self-abnegating system. Though a reconstruction of an individual's psychology will merely provide the medium in which someone's recognition of their vocation can be deemed valid, it is nonetheless the case that Carlyle's approach to virtue is reflexive insofar as it makes a felicitous relationship between psychology and history the standard of the good. Each individual has a vocation in the world; their vocations may differ wildly, even within a single generation; and some people are entitled to radically defy the norms and laws of their society—these possibilities would be most explicitly articulated, most fully explored, in Carlyle's attempt to articulate a theory of heroism and hero-worship as the practical basis of all ethical and religious life. That theory of heroism makes sincerity its *sine qua non*, but sincerity defined along lines that will seem strange to modern readers, and so it will be necessary to briefly describe Carlyle's conception of sincerity.<sup>9</sup>

### Sincerity as an Originary Virtue: "Burns"

For Carlyle, sincerity is an originary virtue, not only primary in its importance, but also a virtue that makes it possible for other dispositions to act as virtues rather than as vices. In *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, he makes sincerity his "primary definition of a Great Man," says that "a deep, great, genuine sincerity, is the first characteristic of all men in any way heroic," and defines such men as "*original*" (I.276-7). The meaning of Carlyle's conception of sincerity comes through most clearly and suggestively in his

---

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the significance of the term "sincerity" in late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1972), 12-25; 23; 11; 58.

early review-essay on Robert Burns. According to Carlyle, “the excellence of Burns” is “his *Sincerity*,” a condition which he defines as the continuity between Burns’ effects on the world and his inner life. In Burns’ poetry,

“the passion that is traced before us has glowed in a living heart; the opinion he utters has risen in his own understanding, and been a light to his own steps. [...] It is the scenes that he has lived and labored amidst, that he describes: those scenes [...] have kindled beautiful emotions in his soul, noble thoughts, and definite resolves” (XIII.265).

For Carlyle, sincerity is a felicitous continuity between the passive effects of experience and the conscious actions that result from them. Though he initially defines its value with regards to literature, he expands its importance even further: “We reckon this to be a great virtue; to be, in fact, the root of most other virtues, literary as well as moral” (XIII.267). A fitting and active response to the condition that one finds oneself in—such is the conception of sincerity that Carlyle will build his ethics on.

Carlyle’s emphasis on sincerity as an originary virtue, “the root of most other virtues,” is consistent in his early writing, and checks his temptation to locate virtue in a person’s power to have a significant effect in any circumstance. In his essay on Burns, he equivocates on whether the poet could have fruitfully applied his powers in some other field. While he claims that poetry requires the harmony of one’s faculties, rather than a narrowly defined talent, and while he claims that Shakespeare could have written “a *Novum Organum*,” he doesn’t quite assert such a perfect adaptability for Burns. Yet what he does claim is typical of his frequent but fleeting attempts to convert a person’s outward accomplishments into indications of some inner power with an indefinite range of applications. Burns might have had the endless range that he imagines for Shakespeare, because, “we discern the brawny movements of a gigantic though untutored

strength” (XIII.274-5). Carlyle is often tempted to infer that one-dimensional displays of ability imply a multidimensional capacity—that heroes would be heroic in any circumstance. To accept such a proposition would be a reassuring tribute to the powerful integrity of individuals, a thought which Carlyle evidently finds reassuring, but it would also spoil the individual’s unique connection to their circumstances, diminishing the validating sense of purpose and duty that can be derived from having a singular relationship to one’s historical situation. As such, Carlyle’s tributes to the power of individuals are almost always matched by an account of how intermittently, and with what resistance and disappointment, they arrive at the *proper* application of their abilities. When Carlyle writes in praise of the individuals that he admires, his tendency to cast their relationship to their circumstances as a fraught drama is his way of conveying the sincerity with which they pursue their unique vocation.

Carlyle’s conception of sincerity as an achieved continuity between inner and outer causes is so formative to his thought that it shapes his definition of the aims of biography. If it’s worth writing a man’s biography, then it should make us “acquainted with all the inward springs and relations of his character.” In order to approximate such an intimacy, biography should inquire “how did the world and man’s life, from his particular position, represent themselves to his mind” and “how did coexisting circumstances modify him from without; how did he modify these from within?” (XIII.259). To judge someone as sincere one must already have attempted to locate them within a world of causes and effects while still granting a unity and coherence to selfhood that cannot be analyzed into an arbitrary play of forces. Crucial to Carlyle’s conception of biography is an ability to say that people’s actions are uniquely *theirs*. Biography, for

Carlyle, is necessarily an exercise in speculative psychology, a reconstruction of a mind's relationship to circumstance.

#### A Usable Present – Heroism as a Reflexive Virtue

References to heroism and hero-worship begin to appear in Carlyle's writing at the beginning of the 1830s,<sup>10</sup> but they receive their most extensive theorization in his 1840 series of lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. These lectures, published as a book of essays, consolidate his ideas on heroism in a way that follows from the central concerns of his early social writings, like "Signs of the Times," and his early exercises in configuration in his biographical essays.

Carlyle's early social thinking articulated a need to reapprehend and reconceptualize the political significance of the present itself, and his later theory of heroism and hero-worship is an attempt to give a compelling shape to the recognition of the present as a time of vocations. He had his broadest influence on political thinking in the Victorian novel by articulating the Condition of England problem, and he did so by politicizing our relationship to time. In "Signs of the Times," he argues that the two main and malignant tendencies in British life are "the Millennarians [...] on the right hand, and the Millites on the left," both of which groups are involved in attempting to prophesy the future—either as the coming of the kingdom of heaven or the heaven of the "greatest-happiness principle" (XIII.464). Against this itch to predict, he opines that "Our grand business undoubtedly is, not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to *do* what lies clearly at hand" (XIII.462). Carlyle's insight was to recognize that, in the midst of

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Thomas Carlyle, "Boswell's Life of Johnson," in Vol. XIV of *Carlyle's Complete Works* (NYC: Lovell, 1869), 412.

massive economic and technological upheavals, the relationship between the present and the future was up for grabs. Millenarians and Utilitarians were both taking for granted that they already knew what kind of relationship the present would have to the future. To Carlyle, this is a cheap *deus ex machina*, regardless of whether the emphasis is placed on God or the machine. What he claims—modestly in “Signs of the Times” and more flamboyantly in subsequent essays—is that people can revitalize themselves and their society by reacting bravely to the duties and possibilities implied by “what lies clearly at hand.”

What Carlyle gave to his readers was a usable present: he was able to articulate a dialectical view of history in which contradictory ethical and political positions nonetheless build on each other, only to be canceled and surpassed by new ones, while simultaneously portraying each individual person’s ethical and political situation as a vocational encounter with the Eternal Natural Order, a meaningfully personal encounter in which we have duties to realize. The irony of Carlyle’s appeal to a spirit of simple duty is that “what lies clearly at hand” immediately acquires a vast, illimitable significance because, “the poorest Day [...] is the conflux of two Eternities” (XIII.465). If this made his thinking mystified and unrigorous, it also made it highly adaptable: the challenge of finding deliberate agency embodying some authority beyond tradition or procedural politics calls forth the influential rhetoric of radical self-transformation that ends “Signs of the Times” and, later, reaches an apogee in his rhetoric of heroism. In contrast to what Carlyle characterizes as the “Mechanical,” calculating tendency of his age, he celebrates the “Dynamical,” which consists of “the primary, unmodified forces and energies of man [...] all which have a truly vital and *infinite* character” (XIII.474). This celebration of the

infinite Dynamical—which will always, by definition, remain incommensurate, useless for calculation—is proudly mystifying. That proved to be one of its strengths. The very meaning of contemporary life was up for grabs: novelists, poets, and critics of various persuasions could hope to find new, unanticipated possibilities, which would duly take their place in the vital order of the universe.<sup>11</sup> This is a weak relativism: it asserts that moral imperatives are broadly relative to their circumstance, although it assumes that there is a single appropriate choice in every case. What is unique in Carlyle's influence is not that he taught his readers to historicize themselves, but rather that he translated all historical analysis in terms of the dispositions with which individuals meet their circumstances.

Indeed, it is the flexibility of heroism, rather than its rigidity, that makes heroism such an unstable paradigm for social criticism—if it were merely the veneration of brute force, it would not be so counterintuitive, even perverse at times. The ethic of sincerity that he makes the *sine qua non* of heroism is an attempt to unite his relativizing attention to historical circumstance with his universalizing belief in an eternal and divine natural order—to simultaneously exalt the range of human activity, while maintaining that a person can always discover the one thing that they are truly called upon to do in any given situation. Yet sincerity, even as a term of art, is overburdened with ambiguities.

---

<sup>11</sup> In addition to his extensive influence among novelists and poets of the nineteenth century, David R. Sorenson notes that “The range of [Carlyle’s] impact accommodated a disparate array of revolutionaries, nationalists, liberals, feminists, and socialists, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Gavan Duffy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Engels, Margaret Fuller, Alexander Herzen, Geraldine Jewsbury, Karl Marx, Giuseppe Mazzini, John Mitchel, William Morris, John Ruskin, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Oscar Wilde.” David Scott has argued that C. L. R. James was influenced by Carlyle in his conception of Toussaint L’Ouverture in *Black Jacobins*. David R. Sorenson, “Introduction.” *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Ed. David Sorenson and Brent E. Kinser. New Haven: Yale UP, 2013, 15. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 71-9.

People are heroic if sincere, sincere if they are responding fittingly and actively to what their situation uniquely calls for them to do—but how can anyone know that another person is doing exactly *that*? As we saw earlier, judging someone's sincerity requires a foray into speculative psychology, an attempt to reconstruct the origin of their actions as either the active response of a united psyche or as passive capitulations to social pressures or disorganizing desires. Aside from the biography of Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle approaches psychology without the convenient omniscience of the fiction writer. As such, he has to train his readers in the recognition of sincerity through a series of idiosyncratic examples, speculatively reconstructed. His rhetorical strategies for writing about heroism will enable the wide adaptability that other authors found in his thinking. This adaptability suggests the instability of Carlyle's work as social theory; yet Carlyle is not unique among would-be social theorists in struggling to chase the implications of history into personal responsibility. The doggedness with which he tries to motivate action in the present through self-reflexivity is exemplary of the struggle faced by anyone who attempts to improve the prospects for social transformation through criticism.

#### How to Write about a Hero when you See One

When Carlyle praises heroic individuals in retrospect, he is attempting to develop a capacity for heroism and hero-worship in his readers prospectively. In order to make praise into an adaptable ethical education, Carlyle attempts to channel and train his reader's admiration. Because heroism is the sincere recognition of what one is uniquely called upon to do in one's situation, the standard narrative for his heroes is built around the recognition of a vocation. Though he occasionally claims that heroes are good at all

things, his narrative template is not the prodigy or the natural talent, but rather an individual recognizing a higher calling after years of obscurity. In order to cultivate such a potential for vocation in his readers, he writes in a style that attempts to simulate a conversion experience, where admiration of the heroic figure brings with it a clarifying, simplifying sense of recognition that actively thrusts aside all mere complexities. From the reader, he attempts to educe a range of affinities in the hope that respect, attraction, even eroticism, will win them over to admiration of the exemplar's ethical grandeur.

Though Carlyle attributes many different lessons to the early obscurity of his heroes, the contrast between the latency of their youth and their realized vocation is the form in which he gives historical significance to their sincerity. Carlyle has various claims about how his heroes are improved by their youthful experience—he argues in *Past and Present* that Samson's early obeisance prepares him to lead, for example (XII.87; 75)—but the emphasis on early obscurity serves two general purposes, whatever additional values he attributes to those periods of latency. First, by describing their wholesome obscurity in youth, he can set aside any suspicion of personal ambition. Second, in order to make the hero's sincerity extend beyond mere self-knowledge, there has to be a process by which they recognize their obligations in terms of their historical situation. Thus, Carlyle leverages the quiet modesty of Mohammed's first forty years against accusations of ambition, but he also frames his description of Mohammed's prophetic awakening by characterizing his encounter with the idols of his age as an unbearable provocation: "Though all men walk by them, what good is it? The great Reality stands glaring there upon *him*. He there has to answer it, or perish miserably. Now, even now, or else through all Eternity never" (I.285-6). In this pile-up of deictics

(there, there, now, now), the hero is individuated by history. Throughout the rest of the volume, he makes Dante (314), Shakespeare (330), Luther (357), Knox (371), Johnson (400), Burns (410), and Cromwell (432) flash forth from obscurity. It is Napoleon's lack of such "silent walking, through long years, with the Awful, Unnameable of this Universe," his lack of such "Latency," that makes him inferior to Cromwell and a grudging afterthought in the lecture on "The Hero as King" (455). It is through this narrative of sincerity rising to meet historical circumstance that Carlyle makes heroism into a reflexive virtue.

The rhetorical and representational power of this hero template is clearest if we contrast it with the *Bildungsroman*. As the translator of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Carlyle played a crucial role in bringing this genre to Britain.<sup>12</sup> As Franco Moretti argues, the *Bildungsroman* turns youth into a symbolic representation of the unstable potential in European societies. The duration of youth allows for the unfolding of two rival dynamics, classification and transformation. The former dynamic fatefully drives towards a clear revelation of what the character really is, while the latter dynamic is most itself when it suppresses any hint of teleology in the narrative, with the emphasis on the unorganized processes at work.<sup>13</sup> By leaving the hero's past in obscurity, Carlyle's hero template sidesteps these dynamics of the *Bildungsroman* narrative. In their place, he gives us an alternative to either stable destiny or unorganized processes. The hero template mystifies the causal determinants of his heroes. It is a story without a

---

<sup>12</sup> And not just as the translator of Goethe. Barry Qualls argues that "Carlyle's role was, in *Sartor Resartus*, to amalgamate the Romantic strands of the *Bildungsroman* and the progresses of the old religious books, and to found this amalgamation in the harsh realities of contemporary social life." Barry Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Literature* (NYC: Cambridge UP, 1982), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1987), 7.

beginning, but that means that middle and end become something like cause and effect, even though the causal nature of the hero's emergence remains opaque. The blurry background and the abruptness with which the hero appears make this template both endlessly adaptable and hard to view as a genre in its own right, because it isn't well-suited to standing on its own.

Carlyle's style and rhetoric support the hero template's foreshortening of narrative. It is his effort to produce sudden revelations in his readers that leads Carlyle to several of the most familiar and characteristic features of his rhetoric. Rather than clearly defining his terms, for example, he makes a show of drawing out the true but veiled meanings that are already nascent within familiar words.<sup>14</sup> The reader is assumed to already have intimations of the mysteries that Carlyle has been obliged to elaborate—the sincere man is supposed to already understand the deep significance of “work” or “king,” and his intuitive familiarity with these concepts testifies that these ideas are already active in the world. Not only is the truth already implicit in the world, but accepting it will free us from the tiresome and confounding chaos that Carlyle presents as the alternative. Carlyle frequently contrasts a list of contemporary references, jargons, and allusions with a blunt reversion to the comparatively simple truth that he advocates.<sup>15</sup> Carlyle's reversions to simplicity use irony in a way that is rarely considered within the formal study of literature, but not uncommon in public discourse: facing a tension between two points of view, one complex and skeptical, the other simple and credulous, he laughs at complexity. Rather than irony leading to polysemy, it marks our recognition

---

<sup>14</sup> For a perceptive overview of this feature of Carlyle's rhetoric, see John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, 41-7.

<sup>15</sup> George Levine deftly analyzes a representative example of this maneuver in his *Boundaries of Fiction*, 43-8.

of those conflicting possibilities by refusing them. Finally, he tends to present differences in position as fundamental, admitting no intermediate degrees. In practice, Carlyle's rejection of fine moral shadings, his Manicheanism, is more a psychological tactic, and a corresponding rhetorical gambit, than it is a metaphysical conviction.<sup>16</sup> By processing the world in a series of revelations and renunciations, the mind can move through a series of clean and sudden paradigm shifts, rather than being divided against itself while one commitment slowly gains preeminence over another. Carlylean rhetoric serves his compromise between historical relativism and personal vocation: time holds untold revelations, but the sincere man is united with himself and sees things as they are.

What Carlyle is attempting to induce in his readers is a series of conversion experiences, in which we realize our capacity to reorganize our apprehension of the world through configuration—if not yet to a purpose, then to another person, if not yet to our own heroism, then to hero-worship—setting aside our reservations in favor of some clarifying realization. In Carlyle's exercises in configuration, he tries to make his readers undergo the experience of being won-over to admiration of the individuals that he praises. Sometimes, this is a matter of overcoming the reader's condescension to old legends, as in his accounts of Odin and St. Edmund, which attempt to reinterpret clouds of myth as emanations that prove the power of an original reality. In other cases, he can assume that his readers feel an aversion to the celebrated hero, and writes to make them set those qualms aside, like he does in his treatments of Muhammad and Cromwell. In yet others, he counters the sense that a person's field of action couldn't be considered heroic, as he does for writers like Shakespeare or Dante.

---

<sup>16</sup> For a digest of Carlyle's Manichean divisions between truth and sham, good and diabolical, see *The Victorian Sage* 33-6.

Carlyle wants to make the experience of admiring someone into a revelatory event, and this desire is clearest when the turn from reservations to veneration is most condensed; in such moments, we can see the range of affinities that he appeals to in his hope that affection or attraction can turn into admiration. At times, his rhetoric extends to an uncanny tenderness, as in an extravagant passage from *Past and Present*, where he adoringly describes medieval monks giving their reverence to the relic-corpse of St. Edmund, the founder of their order. He anticipates his readers' disdain for these superstitious medieval Catholics, but asks, "who knows how to reverence the Body of a Man? It is the most reverend phenomenon under this Sun." His enthusiasm for their ritual calls up one of his favorite quotations: "'Bending before men,' says Novalis, 'is a reverence done to this Revelation in the Flesh. We touch Heaven when we lay our hand on a human Body.' And the Body of one Dead;—a temple where the Hero-soul once was and now is not" (XII.122). Carlyle also includes this line from Novalis about touching heaven when we lay our hand on a human body in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, in both the first and the last lecture (I.244; 423). Its lovely reverence makes for a nice contrast to his hectic, disarming prose, but the sentiment is very much at home in his larger argument, which attempts to imbue the conduct of ordinary human life with revelatory affinities.

There is perhaps no more strangely compacted example of Carlyle finding ethical obligation within historical relativism than his description of Charlotte Corday's assassination of Marat in *The French Revolution*, a scene where awe and infatuation overcome revulsion sentence by sentence. The chapter begins by describing the state of the French Revolution prior to Marat's murder as an exhausting and opaque chronicle. Even at the level of grammar these sentences are hard to scan: full of semi-colons and

colons, but frequently beginning with linking words, such that it becomes hard to parse by what logic these events are meant to be grouped. Then, he describes Charlotte Corday appearing in a lobby, as if she were manifested, all of a sudden, out of the atmosphere.

A completeness, a decision is in this fair female Figure [...]. What if she, this fair young Charlotte, had emerged from her secluded stillness, suddenly like a Star; cruel-lovely, with half-angelic, half-daemonic splendor; to gleam for a moment, and in a moment be extinguished: to be held in memory, so bright complete was she, through long centuries!—Quitting Cimmerian Coalitions without, and the dim-simmering Twenty-five million within, History will look fixedly at this one fair Apparition of a Charlotte Corday; will note whither Charlotte moves, how the little Life burns forth so radiant, then vanishes swallowed by Night.

After the gently lisping sounds of this tribute, where Carlyle's ardor infuses the description with that spirit of conviction which he expects History to feel when it considers Charlotte Corday, the scene of the murder is all the more lurid. Carlyle describes how Marat's "life with a groan gushes out," and he doesn't neglect to remind us that Marat had a family too. He even informs us that "a sister of his, they say, lives still to this day in Paris." But Charlotte Corday's assassination of Marat is presented like the clear path of a meteor through the sky, something beautiful and serene amidst a vast confusion: "huge Paris is circling and simmering, manifold, according to its vague wont: this one fair Figure has decision in it; drives straight,—towards a purpose" (IV.311-8). In the contrast between Paris as a sort of betrayal of cosmic order and Corday as the elegance of a simply realized conviction, we see the way that Carlyle reconstructs sincere individual judgments as inflection points within history. Carlyle's writing embodies one of the primary ways in which configuration is useful for representing historical agency: it creates a sense of historical situatedness and contingency while simultaneously imbuing it with a feeling of obligation.

### Counting on Heroism in a Mass Society

Carlyle's hero-worship is always, at last, about admiring the right people, and his writing is haunted by the difficulties of directing people's affections, especially in an impersonal modern society. His lecture on "The Hero as Man-of-Letters" is, by far, the most unconfident for just this reason. Early in the lecture, he tells his auditors that he'd rather be discussing Goethe, who he considers, "for the last hundred years, by far the notablest of all Literary Men." Unfortunately, it would be "worse than useless" to discuss Goethe to a public so ill-prepared and biased against him (I.380-1). Yet turning to more widely celebrated examples does nothing to put the lecture on a less awkward footing. The Man-of-Letters has the power to reach a mass audience, which means that he "must be regarded as our most important modern person," but his three cases, Robert Burns, Samuel Johnson, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, all experienced periods of public scorn only to leave complicated legacies (I.378; 381). He desperately hopes that the power of charismatic leadership will make its way through new media—so that "*Thought* [...] the true thaumaturgic virtue" can work its magic and govern the virtual Democracy that mass print represents (I.387). In his ideal of heroism and hero-worship, Carlyle hopes to find lives so powerfully persuasive that they can act as emblems of the divine, preceptors of the future in every time and place. Yet while theorizing what he hopes will be the literal process of social transformation, he can only use heroes from the past as metonymies for the possibility of deliberate social transformation.

Carlyle's exercises in configuration are therapeutic, in spite of their higher theoretical aspirations, tokens of an aspiration that anyone might feel: that the collective search for meaning and purpose could proceed as naturally and affirmingly as feeling

admiration for someone. Because Carlyle believes that it is impossible to give a general account of how people will realize their proper vocation, whether as a leader or follower, his attempt to conceive of his theories of heroism and hero-worship as a social program implies a peculiar structure: though he values order and hierarchy, he has to trust that the process by which people will take their place within such an ordered hierarchy will be a self-organizing one. As a self-organizing model for the proper state of society, hero-worship lacks the resources to imagine the multitudes that will make their way through life and either admire the right people or not. In asserting his doctrine of hero-worship so tendentiously, Carlyle's faith is twofold: the world organically has a good and meaningful place for everyone, and no one could be justified in desiring a different one. The variety of people that absorbed his influence, while pursuing incompatible social and artistic projects, indicates that things were not so simple. It is because hero-worship so utterly fails as a social program that it proved so endlessly adaptable as a rhetorical mode, as a way of describing the sway that remarkable individuals hold over us when they seem perfectly integrated with their historical moment and their situation in the world.

Though Carlyle's writing on heroism is naïve to imagine that people can simply be called upon to recognize and accomplish the one thing demanded of them, there is something salutary in his failed attempt to represent this fantasy as a theory, because it is a fantasy that many people partake in. Contemporary critics often do exhortation under assumed names: we demystify or subvert or critique in the hope that political action will come more easily as a result. But literary criticism can only directly affect politics to the extent that it can urge certain prospects for collective action onto its readers. Carlyle makes a poor impression when he blames humanity for not being heroic after his own

design, but he does map out what is entailed in the expectation that people can be radicalized to reshape the world if they only recognize themselves as historically situated.

Indeed, to see a critic bedeviled by the problem of converting analysis into even a prospect of action, we can consider a most inadvertently Carlylean critic, Frederic Jameson.<sup>17</sup> For all their ideological differences, Jameson and Carlyle share certain critical maneuvers: they treat all of causality as an immanent totality, which no one person can definitively comment on, and then they set themselves up as authorities on the manner in which one can locally engage with that totality. Jameson's claim that "History is therefore the experience of Necessity" could have been written by Carlyle. But when it comes time to exhort the reader to action, Jameson is the narrower critic, because he can only imagine one kind of hero, the *echt* Marxist critic who, like Odysseus, brings the blood of history to Tiresias and elicits his speech. Though he disclaims any ethics, Jameson still exhorts his reader with as much presumption as Carlyle, but where Carlyle went on to imagine the various ways that priests and poets and prophets could influence other people, one walks away from *The Political Unconscious* with no image for the contribution that Jameson's followers are going to make towards "political praxis," which, he reminds himself in the book's last sentence, "remains, of course, what Marxism is all about."<sup>18</sup> For all of the sophistication that it displays in adjudicating interesting disagreements among other theorists, *The Political Unconscious* cannot make plausible its central aspiration—that society could be successfully transformed on so fine a basis as academic critics bringing someone else's blood to the analysis of literary texts.

---

<sup>17</sup> This resonance was pointed out to me by Courtney Krolczyk.

<sup>18</sup> Frederic Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982. 102; 19; 299.

In complaining that certain literary critics have smuggled in exhortatory moralizing without working through the effect that they expect to have on other people, I am not suggesting that we should give up the heroic charisma of the critic, as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus once did in their critique of Jameson's style of symptomatic reading.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, we should recognize how much our decidedly indirect influence depends not on analysis but upon the rhetorical effects of configuration, upon training people's apprehension of the good and bad for every changing situation by exercising certain virtues. The failure of Carlyle's theory of heroism demands an alternative.

---

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations*. 108.1 (Fall 2009). 5

## 1.2: John Stuart Mill's Virtual Clerisy

Early in their friendship, John Stuart Mill praised Thomas Carlyle for his capacity to add motivation to knowledge. "You I look upon as an artist," he wrote, "perhaps the only genuine one now living in this country; the highest destiny of all lies in that direction; for it is the artist alone in whose hands Truth becomes impressive and a living principle of action."<sup>20</sup> Many years after their falling out, when Mill reflected on what he gained from Carlyle in his *Autobiography*, it remained this capacity to consolidate ideas that one could gather elsewhere into a form that was uniquely motivating. Indeed, he says that he couldn't learn ideas from Carlyle, because "it was only in proportion as I came to see the same truths, through media more suited to my mental constitution, that I recognized them in his writings." Instead, Carlyle becomes the embodiment, in retrospect, of certain virtues, "not as a philosophy to instruct, but as poetry to animate," a source of commitment rather than a source of education.<sup>21</sup> What Mill learned from his admiration of Carlyle was a way of using configuration, one which has proven to be a popular method in humanistic scholarship.

Mill's tribute to Carlyle carries with it one of the fundamental differences in their thinking on moral psychology. For Mill, the development of knowledge and the development of motivation are separate phenomena. Where Carlyle believed that the recognition of someone as heroic should coincide with a radical restructuring of one's apprehension of what was right and wrong for a given situation, Mill only proposes that

---

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Emery Edward Neff in *Carlyle and Mill* from *Letters of J. S. Mill*. In two volumes. Ed. Hugh S. R. Elliot (Longman's Green & Co: London, 1910), I, 35, 55. Emery Edward Neff, *Carlyle and Mill: An Introduction to Victorian Thought*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (NYC: Octagon Books, 1974), 16.

<sup>21</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 105.

we configure ourselves with models as a mechanism for consolidating our understanding of certain virtues as praiseworthy and, by recognizing one's affinity with those virtues, motivating action. The split emerges most clearly in Mill's review of Carlyle's *French Revolution*.<sup>22</sup> Mill praises Carlyle's book because it "brings us *acquainted* with persons, things, and events" and because he enables us to put ourselves into the minds of its subjects in a way that Hume, for example, couldn't (158; 135). It even ends by echoing Carlyle's essay on "Biography," noting that there has been an "insatiable demand for realities" developing among Europeans in the last thirty years (165). Yet he breaks with Carlyle by criticizing his hostility to general principles and his extreme particularism in ethical matters. Mill then gives a defense of testing and refining general theories, and says, "such is the part of the philosopher, of the true practical *seer* or person of insight" (162). In this review which gives the highest praise to Carlyle's accomplishment at confronting us with the reality of people as they respond to their historical circumstances, Mill asserts his commitment to the values of abstraction and generalization while coopting one of Carlyle's highest aspirations, to be a "seer." Where Carlyle expects to find new, disjunctive possibilities arise in any instance, Mill writes under the assumption that all action can and should be judged in terms of general principles.

In his essays on Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge,<sup>23</sup> Mill's praise and blame of the two thinkers converts them into patterns for two kinds of intellectual

---

<sup>22</sup> John Stuart Mill. "Carlyle's *French Revolution*." *Essays on French History and Historians*. From Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XX. Ed. John M. Robson. 131-66. All subsequent citations will be parenthetical.

<sup>23</sup> The first of these was published in 1838, a year after the review of *The French Revolution*, and the second was published in 1840. The convention of pairing these essays, in spite of the gap, is supported by comments in the essays and by a remark of Mill's in a letter written to John Sterling while he was writing the Coleridge essay. He describes them as "counter-poles," and notes that, even though he is not the best suited to write an essay on Coleridge, it "seem[s] essential to my purpose that the likeness should be taken from the same point of view as that of Bentham" (405-6). John Stuart Mill. "Letter to John Sterling, 28

engagement necessary to the present moment, each with their corresponding virtues; further, he argues that all the intellectually-inclined members of the younger generation will feel an affinity with one or the other, and the essays are written to give the followers of Bentham and Coleridge a vicarious share in the praise that it gives them. It makes the recently deceased Bentham and Coleridge into a sort of virtual clerisy, a standard for the most pressing projects of reform in the intellectual life of their society. By making an affinity with Bentham or Coleridge the basis for a limited self-reflexivity about virtue, Mill channels the personal bases of motivation towards public ends. Because these essays harness the psychological for the public, they mark a transition point in his thinking about the relationship between personal development and public life, what David Russell has referred to as the relationship between Mill's "aesthetic liberalism" and his "political liberalism." Though it represents just one moment in Mill's career, this compromise between personal affinity and public activity is worth considering, because it has gone on to be repeated in the rhetoric and methods of literary study. Mill's use of configuration to identify unfinished intellectual projects and to motivate their realization would go on to be repeated in F. R. Leavis's republication of the essays, as well as in our practice of "recovering" authors as representatives for intellectual or cultural prospects that valuable to our own time.

Mill's essays on Bentham and Coleridge use configuration to retroactively institute patterns of intellectual authority, where a distinct lack of legitimacy had seemed to prevail. These essays address a problem that Mill had identified earlier in the 1830s, when he referred to the present as an "age of transition" in "The Spirit of the Age,"

---

September 1839." *The Earlier Letters: 1812-48*. From *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Volume XIII. Ed. Francis E. Mineka.

raising his concern that the structures and authorities of the previous age have been discredited without new sources of structure and legitimacy having arisen.<sup>24</sup> To work around the difficulties of formally instituting structures of intellectual authority, Mill claims that upheavals of the previous generation “call[ed] forth two sorts of men [...]”. The first type attained its height in Bentham; the last in Coleridge.”<sup>25</sup> The implication of these essays is that the intellectual and cultural life of Britain already has two institutions guiding it, if only we could see them: the kind of people who feel an affinity for Bentham and the kind of people who feel an affinity for Coleridge. Each essay was written after its subject was dead, so neither was being granted any practical authority, and both essays work to undermine the charisma of their subject. The Bentham essay, in particular, presents the high priest of Utilitarianism as an aloof man-child who had built his system on a faulty view of humanity because he was an incomplete person himself. Suffice it to say that Mill isn’t interested in Bentham and Coleridge as heroic actors; instead, he turns them into patterns for intellectual work. Because their commitments are different, their followers can both do their work of intellectual criticism separately from each other, up to a point, with the Coleridgeans oriented towards interpreting the meaning of tradition and the Benthamites oriented towards reforming society’s future. And, even more elegantly, these two camps are in fundamental disagreement with each other, so they’ll have to eventually undermine each other and produce a new set of intellectual

---

<sup>24</sup> John Stuart Mill. “The Spirit of the Age.” *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Volume XXII - Newspaper Writings December 1822 - July 1831 Part I, ed. Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson, Introduction by Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986). 5/9/2015. [http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/256#Mill\\_0223-22\\_1178](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/256#Mill_0223-22_1178)

<sup>25</sup> John Stuart Mill, “Coleridge,” *Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 289.

controversies out of their combined inadequacies. Their preeminence has a built-in expiration date.

By shifting the emphasis from Bentham to Benthamites, Coleridge to Coleridgeans, Mill legitimizes certain patterns of intellectual work as virtues uniquely relevant to the present moment, and thus, *temporarily* worthy of emulation by a large number of more or less obscure followers. These essays distribute legitimacy broadly by praising their subjects in a way that makes their contributions repeatable and adaptable. When Mill describes the intellectual work of Bentham and Coleridge, he goes out of his way to prioritize the banal and inglorious side of their accomplishments. By converting Bentham and Coleridge into patterns of intellectual labor, he also emphasizes the ways in which their virtues can be adopted by anyone who feels an affinity for one or the other. Thus, Bentham is most unambiguously praised for his reorganization of legal codes. Mill says, “he found the practice of law an Augean stable, he turned the river into it which is mining and sweeping away mound after mound of its rubbish.”<sup>26</sup> There’s a similarly dirty description of Coleridge’s refreshing effect on British Empiricism: “to borrow a physiological illustration from Coleridge, they required, like certain secretions of the human body, to be reabsorbed into the system and secreted afresh.”<sup>27</sup> Just as Hercules gave a heroic dignity to lowly labor by cleaning the filthy Augean stables, there can be a similar heroic dignity to intellectual labor, even when it merely improves and refreshes an existing discourse. The implication is that intellectual history isn’t driven by sweeping formulations or even by theories, but rather by the slow work of applying ideas, finding

---

<sup>26</sup> John Stuart Mill, “Bentham,” *Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 239.

<sup>27</sup> Mill “Coleridge,” 271.

contradictions, and refining them. In response to the historical relativism articulated in “The Spirit of the Age,” Mill makes a limited concession to configuration—it’s useful, but only as a guide by which people can find their affinities with a project that is already under way, among a collective whose ethical prospects have already been judged in a consequentialist frame. He revives the possibility that models for virtue can be widely emulated in the interest of consolidating the various elements of cultural and intellectual life into camps with self-limited pretenses.

The virtual clerisy imagined in Mill’s essays on Bentham and Coleridge represents a brief phase in Mill’s thinking on the proper mechanisms for bringing worldly power and moral influence together, but they elucidate an important transition in Mill’s thinking about the relationship between private psychology and public life. If one accepts that Carlyle’s obsessive focus on the particularity of individual ethical situations leaves one ill-equipped to generalize, and if one lacks Carlyle’s faith that everyone can recognize their proper and solely desirable role in the world, then one has a choice between prioritizing the demands of one’s historical situation or the demands of one’s psychological development, and Mill chose the former. Thus, while I agree with David Russell in noting that the later Mill subordinated the “aesthetic liberalism” of his essays of the 1830s, which Russell describes as “more interested in encouraging vitalities of mediated relation than in framing arguments or transmitting knowledge,” and while I agree that the shift coincides with his move away from Carlyle, I want to register why Mill found it difficult to simply balance a political liberalism with aesthetic liberalism, as Russell hopes to do.<sup>28</sup> Following the demands of one’s own development by holding the

---

<sup>28</sup> David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2018), 42; 54; 42-3

world at a distance, even when that distance is recognized as “vitalities of mediated relation,” is nonetheless to prioritize psychological development over taking one’s place in the projects under way in one’s historical situation: the authors that Russell cites as the later practitioners of aesthetic liberalism, like Arnold and Pater, give an even more explicit sense of the sacrifice involved in that choice of priorities, and his concluding remarks give little indication that there’s anything lost in choosing to carve out room for one’s own free unorthodox development.<sup>29</sup> Russell is right to identify and publicize the “aesthetic liberalism” of Mill’s early writing as distinct from his political liberalism, but Mill’s turn against it seems more precisely motivated when it’s considered as an attempt to conceptualize the moral psychology of historicism.

It is useful to reconstruct the intellectual situation in which Mill makes his compromise between personal affinity and public activity, because it has gone on to be repeated in the rhetoric and methods of literary study. Mill’s limited appeal to configuration as an inducement to participation in a larger project justified on more impersonal grounds would go on to be directly reproduced in the republication of the Bentham and Coleridge essays by F. R. Leavis’s in 1950. Their method of configuring their author and readers with models from the past to represent and recover unfinished intellectual projects has been a central strategy in literary studies. When Leavis pulled Mill’s essays on Bentham and Coleridge from *Dissertations and Discussions*, he presented the essays as both a useful text to teach and as representative of the virtues that he wished to make central to his pedagogical project. Just as the essays had answered

---

<sup>29</sup> “By tactfully evading fantasies of knowledge as power, they raise questions about liberalism, about the conundrum of how people are to live together. They make suppositions about the lived quality of sociable relations: about how this relationality is arranged, of the distribution of relations to experience, and of the distributions of attention and appreciation.” Russell 57-8.

Mill's own earlier call for new standards of intellectual legitimacy, Leavis's reprint of these essays is presented as "a propagandist opportunity," contributing towards the project that he had outlined in *Education and the University* with the aim of realizing "a more athletic conception of criticism as a discipline of intelligence."<sup>30</sup> Leavis is not merely concerned to expand the subject matter of literary study to include documents of intellectual history, but rather believes that the field can become more "outward-leading," can prepare students to turn their studies to a wider range of issues, if it cultivates a certain disposition for further and wider learning in its students, what he calls "that conscious and intelligent incompleteness which carries with it the principle of growth [...] the organization that represents a measure of real understanding, and seeks of its very nature to extend and complete itself."<sup>31</sup> Leavis identifies Mill as exemplary of a disposition that he wishes to inculcate in the pedagogy of literary study.<sup>32</sup> He claims that Mill's writings, "have an intellectual distinction that is at the same time a distinction of character" and that Mill, like Arnold "stands for intelligence."<sup>33</sup> What these programmatic remarks suggest is that the publication that singled out the essays on Bentham and Coleridge and confirmed them as classic texts in the study of Victorian literature was a repetition of their basic project, an attempt to identify a disposition that would motivate and guide a project for intellectual renewal and reform. The recognition of Mill's virtue doesn't have the radical independence from existing ethical norms of Carlylean hero-worship, but rather gives focus and animation to an existing project.

---

<sup>30</sup> F. R. Leavis, "Introduction." *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*. NYC: Cambridge UP, 1980. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Leavis 2-3; 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Some of Leavis's other reasons for recommending Mill's essays on Bentham and Coleridge are merely practical—Leavis accepts Mill's choice of these two thinkers as crucial representative figures for the early nineteenth century, and Mill's writing provides a more readily teachable and readable example of the intellectual life of the period than Carlyle or Ruskin. Leavis 7; 36.

<sup>33</sup> Leavis 9; 37.

As a way to make virtue reflexive to circumstance, Mill's essays on Bentham and Coleridge represent a moderate alternative to the radicalism of Carlyle. It is a mechanism by which to give a human shape to the experience of historical and psychological contingency, while retaining the possibility of exhorting individuals to a feeling of ethical urgency. Because it makes only the most limited attempt to personalize ethical claims to individual psychology, it remains far more orderly than Carlyle's approach, and far more easily oriented towards collective action.

## 2.1: Elizabeth Barrett Browning Rediscovered the Present

In the middle of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's magnum opus, *Aurora Leigh*, right as the narration is shifting from retrospect to a running commentary on the present, *Aurora Leigh* pauses the story to give her theory of poetics.<sup>1</sup> When Barrett Browning expressed her desire to write such a "novel-poem" a decade before its publication, she wrote to Robert Browning that she wanted to create "a poem as completely modern as 'Geraldine's Courtship,' running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawing-rooms & the like 'where angels fear to tread'; & so, meeting face to face & without mask the Humanity of the age."<sup>2</sup> This *ars poetica*, which comes right before *Aurora* goes to a party, becomes a meditation on what it means to confront the present in poetry, one so extended that it belies that earlier wish to rush into the drawing room. *Aurora* says that she will need to cultivate "double vision," in order to see the present in spite of the distracting, distorting grandeur and prestige of the past.

In this chapter, I'll argue that double vision is a reflexive virtue, a cultivated disposition for achieving a relationship to history. Like Thomas Carlyle, Barrett Browning is attempting to rediscover the present in a context of historicism. But where Carlyle imagined the present as a transcendent, vocational encounter with the Natural Order, Barrett Browning conceives of the present as multifaceted and labile, an occasion in which people with different histories coexist. In part one of this chapter, I'll show how the definition of double vision in *Aurora Leigh* is informed by two characteristics of her

---

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (NYC: Norton, 1996), 142-61. All subsequent citations to *Aurora Leigh* will be made parenthetically by book and line number.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Letter to Robert Browning, February 27, 1845, *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: 1845-1846*, Vol 1, ed. Elvan Kintner, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), 31.

poetics developed earlier in her career. First, she moves away from a primarily eschatological view of human history in her early engagement with Aeschylus's poetics. Second, she develops a set of poetic strategies for representing the present that revise predecessors like Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Felicia Hemans, displacing the aspiration towards identification with a dialectic of intimacy and estrangement. In the first part of her poem of the Italian Risorgimento, *Casa Guidi Windows*, written in 1848, Barrett Browning achieves what Aurora aspires to in her concept of double vision: a rediscovery of the possibilities of the present in shifting human relationships, as opposed to transcendent vocations. Yet Barrett Browning's relationship to the present is ultimately more conflicted and complex than what is expressed in Aurora's definition of double vision. In part two of this chapter, I'll show how Barrett Browning develops a more alienated and suspicious relationship towards the present in Part Two of *Casa Guidi Windows*, written in 1851, which informs *Aurora Leigh* more broadly.

### The Historicity of Feeling and the Feeling of History

Barrett Browning's conception of double vision isn't the consistent theory of her career; rather, it's her most ambitious attempt to solve a set of problems that had engaged her for many years. A quick overview of the concept will be helpful for isolating those aspects of her work that are central to my argument. Aurora Leigh says that double vision is the poet's ability to

see near things as comprehensively  
As if afar they took their point of sight,  
And distant things as intimately deep  
As if they touched them. (l.185-8)

What follows is her call for poets to “represent the age, / Their age” (l.202-3), a call that speaks to one of the book’s most distinguishing features, its serious attention to the present. Aurora’s exposition of the term suggests a significance beyond the immediate poetic project of the verse-novel. The problem to be solved by double vision is a tendency for poets to prefer the grandeurs of the past to the present, but the solution turns out to entail something more complicated than a simple rebalancing of priority. Double vision involves cultivating a special disposition towards history, a reflexive virtue. Her exposition of the concept hinges on how a person configures themselves through their imaginative relationships with other people.

I argue that double vision operates as a remediation of the way one experiences intimacy and estrangement relative to the past and present. When she’s initially explaining that the present is “ill-discerned” because it is “beheld too close,” she enters into an extended metaphor. She asks us to imagine that Alexander had succeeded in having Mount Athos carved to depict him, and then to imagine “peasants, gathering brushwood in his ear” who

guessed as little as the browsing goats  
Of form or feature of humanity  
Up there, – in fact, had travelled five miles off  
Or ere the giant image broke on them. (l.166-75)

It’s in this sense that our own times are “too great to be apprehended near,” and it’s what immediately proceeds her call for poets to “exert a double vision” (l.181-4). Already, this imagined confrontation between peasants and a colossal image of Alexander the Great makes an odd cross between the immediacy of a face-to-face encounter and a profound sense of detachment—the finished, plastic image is necessarily an artifact of the past, a face beyond reproach, incapable of making a reply. And when she calls upon poets to

“represent the age,” there is a similar tension: an intense, intimate encounter with something ultimately remote and unknowable. She hails the present as

“this live, throbbing age,  
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,  
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,  
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,  
Than Roland and his knights. (l.202-7)

The grandeur of the present comes with recognizing something human, but it’s even more unknowable and unresponsive than the inert face of a monarch carved on a mountain in an earlier generation. When Barrett Browning expressed her desire to write a verse-novel, she said that it would let her and her reader meet “face to face without mask the Humanity of the age,” but the intensity and the intimacy of the encounters in this passage are derived from recognizing Humanity in manifestations both larger and smaller than any particular person. The present is strangely intransitive. It “brawls,” but with whom? It “cheats, maddens,” but whom? It “calculates, aspires,” but to what? Its passions are caught “betwixt mirrors” in a *mise-en-abyme*. It is not Barrett Browning’s aim simply to arrest the present in this inchoate state of potential, but depicting it with such disorienting intensity shows just how much she demands of the poet’s double vision. The passage doesn’t so much exemplify double vision as it demonstrates the central challenge that it faces: how can we simultaneously view the present with detachment *and* with that frisson of recognition that we feel when confronted, face to face? How can we rediscover the feeling of the present within history?

Double vision is announced as a corrective to an invidious preference for the past over the present, but the resolution to that bias isn’t just a realignment of priorities in favor of the now. It also requires complex adjustments to one’s relationship to history,

which is primarily indexed by one's relationship to other people. Aurora's definition proposes that we recognize two dichotomies (near/far, present/past) as not necessarily parallel to each other and then connect them in a way counter to how they might intuitively be paralleled—that we bring the distant past close, and look at the present from a remove—but this inversion has a different effect on our relationships to the past than it does to our relationship with the present. While the present is to be visualized from a distance, the past is to be seen by poets “as intimately deep / As if they touched them”—sight transformed into touch. Aurora isn't recommending that we have more feeling for the present and less for the past, so much as we imagine the past with more tactile familiarity and the present with more of the distance of spectacle. When Aurora proposes that the present could gain stature in our eyes by being seen at a distance, she demonstrates this by depriving the past of that grandeur. As her argument is leading up to the epic simile about Mount Athos being carved to look like Alexander the Great, she ridicules Payne Knight, an antiquarian, who

travelled higher than he was born to live  
[...] Discoursing of an image seen through fog

and believed “That Homer's heroes measured twelve feet high” (l.141-6). The heroes of the past have to be cut down to human size, and attaching these vast images to bodily realities also returns them to the rigors of time:

Helen's hair turned grey  
[...] And Hector's infant whimpered at a plume (l.147-9).

After calling on poets to represent their own age, she remarks that

King Arthur's self  
Was commonplace to Lady Guenever (l.210-1).

The giant images of the past must age into that depth of intimacy at which even paramours may become all too familiar. The past isn't banished from her poetry, but it loses visual grandeur in order to become more bodily and intimate.

In Aurora's explanation of double vision, we have a formula for feeling the present within history. The present is too vast and changing to be comprehensively seen, but the very intensity of that encounter, of being face to face with something indefinite, might be recast as a source of spiritual and ethical intensity. The past looms over us in large images, but must have been made of palpable realities. Already, we can see how the tensions that define double vision (past and present, near and far) derive their significance from a set of earlier conflicts that don't consistently align with these.<sup>3</sup> Double vision is the culmination of an ongoing attempt to feel the present within history by managing the historicity of feeling.

The historicity of feeling is an ugly phrase. I'm resorting to it as a way of limiting and defining my engagement with the role of emotion in Barrett Browning's poetry to

---

<sup>3</sup> When writing about "double vision," there is a risk of turning it into a term for dialectical sophistication, as such. Because the dichotomies directly engaged in her definition of the term are linked to other oppositions that Barrett Browning explores, there is a temptation to run together dichotomies that don't quite align. Consider Dolores Rosenblum's essay on *Casa Guidi Windows* and *Aurora Leigh*, which inaugurated the fruitful interpretive tradition of connecting "double vision" to her great poem of the Italian Risorgimento. Rosenblum winds up aligning three different senses of doubleness without giving a clear sense of how they relate. The first is between dead tradition and living experience; the second is between the lived (and sometimes domestic) moment and the cosmic perspective (which would presumably include the past); the third is an opposition between the human and the abstract, with the abstract being associated with the past (62-3). "Double vision" is especially appealing to critics, because it resonates with some of the most consistently admired features of Victorian poetry in general and of Barrett Browning's poetry in particular. Ever since Isobel Armstrong's seminal *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*, one of the chief glories of Victorian poetry has been the "double poem," a spring-loaded, dialectical poem in which two levels coexist in an unresolved struggle with each other. And Barrett Browning is a poet who challenges some of the central dichotomies of Victorian literary culture, most obviously by claiming some of the ambitions and prerogatives usually reserved for male poets, but also by playing with the boundaries between public and private. The challenge is to define how the dichotomies in her definition of double vision relate to certain other dichotomies in her work more or less directly. Dolores Rosenblum, "*Casa Guidi Windows and Aurora Leigh: The Genesis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Visionary Aesthetic*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 4:1 (Spring, 1985), 61-8. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (NYC: Routledge, 1993), 13-7.

just the ways in which it relates to her thinking about temporality and history. I follow the lead of Angela Leighton's critical study of feeling in Victorian women's poetry which shows how women poets self-consciously negotiated with the paradigm of female emotionality and uses that very self-consciousness as a way to isolate a particular aspect of this vast subject. I share her emphasis on considering emotion vis-à-vis relationships, and her argument that Barrett Browning is consciously complicating the relationship between public and private is foundational for my own.<sup>4</sup> Leighton characterizes Victorian women poets as "writing against the heart." Their poetry

grows out of a struggle with and against a highly moralized celebration of women's sensibility. [...] This dissociation of sensibility from the affairs of the world – a dissociation already decried in the later works of Mary Wollstonecraft – is one of the woman poet's most debilitating inheritances.<sup>5</sup>

Here feeling is understood in terms of connections to other people and the various burdens or prospects that they imply.

For Barrett Browning, the challenge of relating one's psyche to one's historical situation is not defined by the strait gate of vocation, as it was for Carlyle, but rather by the struggle to apprehend the incommensurate ways in which people's feelings unfold in the present. First, we'll look at how *A Drama of Exile* shifts its framework for representing history away from Christian eschatology and towards human feelings. In subsequent poems, Barrett Browning develops a set of poetic techniques that I'll refer to as desynchronization effects for representing how feelings unfold without attempting to

---

<sup>4</sup> Isobel Armstrong takes a similar approach with different emphases. She characterizes Victorian women poets as writing within and against an "expressive tradition." Their ambivalent but active engagement with this paradigm results in an interest in the disconnect between mental state and expression which renders representation as a barrier, and thus in an interdependence between expression and repression, as opposed to an opposition between the two (341). Isobel Armstrong, "'A Music of Thine Own': Women's Poetry – an Expressive Tradition?" *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (NYC: Routledge, 1993), 318-77.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville, VA: U P of Virginia, 1992), 3.

identify with those feelings. Her attention to the ways in which feelings develop over time heightens her sense of the incommensurability that exists between people's psyches and the impossibility of maintaining perfect reciprocity. Rather than prioritizing sympathetic identification, her poetics represent a dialectic between intimacy and estrangement that shapes her depiction of the present.

### A New Apocalypse of Sense

In chapter one, we saw how Thomas Carlyle has an ambivalent relationship to individual psychology, which is reflected in the way he represents his heroes responding to their historical situation with uncompromising directness. On the one hand, extremes of feeling have a totemic quality for Carlyle. He believes that there are decisive inflection points in history and that such moments should be sublimely all-consuming for the individuals who act through them. To represent such radical reactions, he needs to depict all of the raptures of awe and disgust that such an experience of history would be expected to induce. On the other hand, Carlyle systematically underrepresents the range of feelings and attachments that exist in a person's life, because he views an excessive attention to one's psyche as an impediment to decisive action and an invitation to insincerity. In Carlyle's hands, a person's life gets reduced to the few instances in which they make a felicitous realization of their special role in history. With the exception of *Past and Present*, Carlyle ignores or travesties the dull intervals in which people serve their creaturely needs and maintain their relationships, and even there, the exoticism of the medieval setting saves him from really exploring the more pedestrian feelings of everyday life.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning responds to the eschatological bent of Carlyle's historicism by recentering the experience of the present with all of the complexities that are subsumed by his foreshortened depictions of heroic acts. She imagines the moral psychology of historicism in terms that foreground just those features of a person's psychic life that Carlyle had found irrelevant or even dissipating. An essay on Carlyle cowritten by Barrett Browning and Richard H. Horne for his *New Spirit of the Age* criticizes him for his neglect of the creaturely reality of suffering. They position him as the necessary antithesis to Jeremy Bentham, with Carlyle speaking for the soul and Bentham for the body, but they add, "the wants of the body will win the day [...]. The immortal soul can well afford to wait till its case is repaired."<sup>6</sup> The decisive issues of the day must be conceived of and ameliorated as material realities. The process of framing the relationship between Bentham's body and Carlyle's soul this way not only urges a certain balance of priorities in favor of the former, but it also implicitly undermines one of Carlyle's central argumentative strategies. To say that the "soul can well afford to wait till its case is repaired" is to let the body (the case) have its own history, one that cannot be subordinated to the simplifying logic of spiritual imperatives that Carlyle so often appeals to. For Barrett Browning, there are already multiple histories unfolding within individual people.

In her poetry, Barrett Browning contends with feelings as a practical reality with their own duration and distorting effects on time in a way that Carlyle does not. Not only does Barrett Browning programmatically shift her focus to the representation of contemporary life, with the palaver of the drawing room emphatically included, but she

---

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Richard H. Horne, "Thomas Carlyle," in *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage*, ed Jules Paul Seigel (London: Routledge, 1971) 236, 241.

also develops a set of conceptual and representational strategies for attending to the ways in which people's emotions and relations decisively shape their experience of history. Feelings have their own historicity, their own durations and their own distorting effects on the experience of time, and the historicity of feelings shapes the feeling of the present. Early in her career, her attempts to depict events of eschatological significance lead her to confront the challenge of representing the experience of suffering in time; that confrontation with the historicity of feeling leads her, in turn, to increasingly shift her attention away from depicting history in terms of transcendent spiritual destinies.

Barrett Browning makes her decisive turn from an eschatological view of history to the historicity of ordinary human experience in *A Drama of Exile*, a poem that depicts the experiences of Adam and Eve after the Fall, as they attempt to make their way in the world.<sup>7</sup> *Exile* is her second attempt to adapt the poetics of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* to the central events of Christian eschatology—the other, *The Seraphim*, depicts two angels witnessing the suffering of Christ on the cross. The passions of Prometheus, of Jesus, and of Adam and Eve, each index a caesura in the history of the cosmos, a moment of arrest. Yet each exists in its narrative to be overcome. As Barrett Browning moves from translating *Prometheus Bound* to writing *The Seraphim* and, finally, *A Drama of Exile*, she increasingly engages the interval of suffering as a creaturely reality: Prometheus's suffering is a demonstration of his titanic will and Jesus's indicates the mystery of his dual nature as both God and man, but Adam and Eve's suffering is just human agony. Though the narrative of *Exile* is resolved by the appearance of Christ

---

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Ed. Ruth M. Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 67-98. All subsequent references to poems other than *Aurora Leigh* will be given parenthetically from this volume, first by page number and then subsequently by line number.

(ll.1758-68), the poem centers on that indefinite, ongoing present in which humans live and suffer, and which is supposed to be ultimately superseded by eschatological history.

*A Drama of Exile* adapts the practice of interpreting human experience as emblematic, but it repurposes what had originally been a spiritual framework as a technique for remediating suffering, for experiencing it at a temporal remove. Lucifer arguing with Gabriel, characterizes the mortals' position as, "a new apocalypse of sense" (l.161), and this becomes a poetic crux: when representing suffering elicited by the most catastrophic shifts in the order of the cosmos, what role can there be for human feeling? On their first night outside of Eden, Adam and Eve see the signs of the zodiac surrounding them (ll.947-51). Adam interprets this encounter as the crucible of their struggle to learn how to live, a process that will depend upon their ability to see past their suffering to these

dim exponents of the creature-life  
As earth contains it (ll.996-7).

When Eve asks whether they see these forms "By dream or sense," Adam responds that

Our Spirits have climbed high  
By reason of the passion of our grief,  
And, from the top of sense, looked over sense  
To the significance and heart of things  
Rather than things themselves. (ll.991-5)

He advises her to "Gaze on them beloved! / By stricter apprehension of the sight," with

what is known  
Subduing the unknown and taming it  
From all prodigious dread. (ll.990-1002)

Though it is fundamentally simpler than the theory of double vision advanced in *Aurora Leigh*, Adam's interpretive strategy establishes one of Barrett Browning's central preoccupations. He is positing a method for coordinating the ongoing, shifting feelings of

the present with a view to larger histories. To make human history thinkable, one has to be able to both recognize suffering and see beyond it to a broader context. When they look at the human figures in the zodiac, Adam recognizes “manhood’s curse of labor,” but Eve follows Adam’s earlier advice, “subduing the unknown and taming it,” and finds relief in these images (ll.1019-34). The split in perspective between the two instantiates the shift from interpreting their suffering in terms of its larger eschatological significance (“manhood’s curse of labor”) to interpreting it in terms of the temporal possibility of learning how to adapt in response to experience. The prospect for understanding the “creature-life” depends upon simultaneously recognizing the feeling of it and remediating it, viewing it as part of a larger history.

#### Desynchronization Effects

*A Drama of Exile* attends to the historicity of human feeling, rather than letting them be subsumed into a cosmically-ordained history. It depicts Adam and Eve learning how to abstract their feelings to deprive them of their intensity and to situate them in a history that is indefinite in its ends and human in its dimensions. In the sonnets that follow *A Drama of Exile* in her 1844 volume of poetry, Barrett Browning develops this attention to the historicity of feeling into a representational strategy that can function independently of eschatology. Rather than trying to describe feelings as they feel during their duration, she invokes them abstractly and then represents their effects. The result is to transform these emotional states into events in a person’s psychological history, positing an external form for them and then depicting that form in something like an emblematic tableau. Doing so desynchronizes the act of recognizing a feeling from the

process of experiencing that feeling. This strategy of temporal displacement is central to Barrett Browning's poetics, and it ultimately informs the way in which she represents human history more broadly.

A sonnet called "Grief" echoes earlier claims about the proper expression of emotion within poetry, but fulfils those programmatic statements by developing a representative strategy for abstracting emotion by displacing it into the past. It argues that "hopeless grief is passionless" and that only

men incredulous of despair  
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air  
Beat upward to God's throne in loud access  
Of shrieking and reproach. (99; ll.1-5)

The true form of grief is a condition of supreme stillness, compared at first to a desert that lies

silent-bare  
Under blanching, vertical eye-glare  
Of the absolute Heavens (ll.5-8)

and then to

a monumental statue set  
In everlasting watch and moveless woe  
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath. (ll.8-12)

The austerity of her vision is made to vouch for its immediacy: the poem ends by challenging its reader to confront the icon of suffering it has set before us.

Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet:  
If it could weep, it could arise and go. (ll.13-14)

The argument of this sonnet is made in an earlier poem that critiques Laetitia Elizabeth Landon for the theatrical mourning in her monody on the death of Felicia Hemans (46-7). What Barrett Browning articulates in this early poetic manifesto becomes a

representational strategy in the sonnet “Grief.” The appropriate way to represent the extremes of human feeling is abstracted, and then stationed in sensuous form. The use of desynchronizing from the emotion in question is to give it a more spatial form in order to look at their relations and effects, to encounter it as an artifact or an image.

These desynchronization effects let her present the effects of an emotion without linking the poem to its temporality. She attends to the disjunctions in psychic life. In the same set of sonnets that includes “Grief,” she has a poem called “Pain in Pleasure,” which describes a happy thought turning painful. The thought is deprived of any specificity, to the point that its emergence is a grammatical fragment, something uncaused. The poem begins,

A Thought ay like a flower upon mine heart,  
And drew around it other thoughts like bees  
For multitude and thirst of sweetnesses. (101-2, ll.1-4)

She says that “whereat rejoicing” she wished that she were like “the Greek whistler” who has the power to lure bees. Even though she’s positing that she doesn’t have this power, she’s still punished for the wish:

The thought I called a flower grew nettlerough,  
The thoughts, called bees, stung me to festering. (ll.10-11)

While her “Reason” wakes to tell her that the “gladdest thoughts” will all prove “sad enough to sting” if thought for too long (ll.12-4), the poem isn’t really proffering a lesson. What changes between the first apian tableau and the second is that she becomes detached from the happy thought in the process of enjoying it; she becomes a would-be beekeeper instead of a swarm of happy thoughts sucking nectar from a thought-blossom. There’s something blank, even blotting about emotions in these poems—they generate meaning, but evade having definite meanings themselves. (It’s no wonder that Emily

Dickinson loved Barrett Browning.) In order to do justice to the historicity of feeling, its unfolding effects in a person's life, Barrett Browning tends to detach her poems from the intensity and duration that specific feelings demand when they're experienced. Instead, they work through a series of tableaux that let us look upon these feelings as they unfold in the wider world. My sense that tableau can induce a feeling of temporal displacement is derived from Carolyn Williams's work on melodrama. In an essay on George Eliot and melodrama, she notes that there is a formal homology between the "metafigural figure" of a person "posed against or emerging from within a background [...] to suggest the dynamics of historical emergence" and the melodramatic tableau, with both creating a dialectic between the detached instance and the sequential unfolding of time.<sup>8</sup>

The desynchronizing effect of tableau allows her to suggest how a moment contains multiple subjective and intersubjective states with their own incongruous histories. "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," for example, actively desynchronizes the reader's experience of the runaway slave's narrative from the feelings expressed in the course of that narrative. The poem is structured to establish its speaker in a scene, calling out to the ghosts of the pilgrims while surrounded by hostile white people in the present. Her act of infanticide isn't intimated until the eighteenth stanza of thirty-six and isn't narrated until the twenty-first (193). Contrast this with one of Felicia Hemans's poems of infanticide, like "Indian Woman's Death Song," which articulates the narrative situation at the outset and then situates the reader in the direct experience of the mother's anguish, moving from a prose headnote into poetry and from third-person to first.<sup>9</sup> Even

---

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Williams, "Moving Pictures: George Eliot and Melodrama," *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (NYC: Routledge, 2004), 123, 142 n.26, 134.

<sup>9</sup> Felicia Hemans, "Indian Woman's Death Song," *Records of Women* (Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 1999), 57-9.

when the runaway slave is describing her past, there's a striking attention to her physical positioning in relation to other people. In particular, there is a continual reference to looking and being looked at, which lets the poem stage moments of intense feeling without losing their social dimension.<sup>10</sup> In this poem, which is stripped of so many particularities, such as named characters or a consistent geographical reference point for the runaway slave's past, a psychologically driven narrative is told through a series of tableaux that are emotionally-charged, even when the context is undermining their conventional emotional significance.

In Barrett Browning's poetry, there is a symbiosis between representing the present with psychological complexity and representing the ways in which people's diverging histories can interact with each other in the present. Much of the richness of "Runaway Slave" comes through in the tableaux in which the speaker remembers herself—when she describes her and her beloved gazing into each other's eyes, for example, or when she remembers herself gazing upon her child, but seeing her master's look in its eyes (ll.61-3; 144-5). Subjectivity devolves upon intersubjectivity—feelings take on greater complexity by being understood in terms of their social significance. At the same time, by depicting the ways in which people's feelings respond to each other without necessarily syncing into sympathy, Barrett Browning can depict the present as multifaceted and labile, extended beyond any one person's apprehension and all the more difficult to define or understand as a result. Barrett Browning depicts the present with a

---

<sup>10</sup> Tricia Lootens argues that a "A Curse for a Nation" is the poem in which Barrett Browning makes the presumed whiteness of the poetess figure into a problem. "A Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" is undoubtedly a white Englishwoman's fantasy of slavery, but the detachment it enforces between the speaker, the story, and the audience suggests her self-consciousness about the difficulties of sharing in other people's experiences, which anticipates the supreme self-awareness of that later poem. Tricia Lootens, *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2017), 178

degree of psychological complexity not to be found in Carlyle and with a degree of estrangement not to be found in Carlyle, Hemans, or Landon. The psychological and social dimensions of the present are both historicized, but in a way that draws greater attention to the discontinuity and incommensurability that exists between people's feelings.

### Face to Face or Side by Side

The asymmetries and intermittencies that exist in people's feelings for each other play an important but implicit role in Barrett Browning's most mature statements on history—in *Casa Guidi Windows* and *Aurora Leigh*—so it will be helpful to briefly turn to her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, because they occasion her most sophisticated representations of those intersubjective dynamics. Throughout her career, Barrett Browning expresses a deep suspicion of relying on emotional reciprocity among people. An early occasional poem, "L.E.L.'s Last Question," turns Letitia Elizabeth Landon's last question, "do you think of me as I think of you?" into a refrain (178-9, ll.1, 7, 8, 14, 28, 34, 43, 50, 56, 63), suggesting the tenuousness of sympathy. Here, as in her poem on Landon's monody for Felicia Hemans, Barrett Browning is critiquing Landon as a proxy for the limited position of the woman poet, but her doubts about emotional reciprocity run deep. She also posits perfect reciprocity as an inhuman ideal in "An Apprehension," a sonnet from the same collection (102). She says that even if

all the gentlest-hearted friends I know  
Concentrated in one heart their gentleness,  
That still grew gentler till its pulse was less  
For life than pity,

she would still be afraid to put her heart

nakedly below  
The palm of such a friend. (ll.1-6)

In spite of the defensiveness implied by this position, she urges the “angels” to let their  
“flood / Of bitter scorn dash on me!” because she already bears

calmly all the time  
This everlasting face to face with God (ll.11-4).

Here, as elsewhere in Barrett Browning’s writing, being face-to-face is imagined as a depersonalizing state of intimacy, rather than as a stance of sympathy.<sup>11</sup> In a letter, she goes so far as to say that “Death is a face-to-face intimacy.”<sup>12</sup> These early poems don’t just register the vulnerability of being seen and the potential abjection of depending on other people’s feelings. They use an impossibly high standard of emotional reciprocity to justify an ever more intensive attention to the complications that keep people’s feelings from staying in sync with each other. What her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* add to these doubts about the possibility of mirroring another person’s feelings is an intricate and positive account of the emotional toing and froing that happens within relationships.

The disparities that one finds in one’s relationships both heighten one’s awareness of the present and also provides a framework for representing the present in history, because even the process of shifting in and out of sympathy highlights the lability, the open-endedness of the present. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* makes a major departure

---

<sup>11</sup> My approach to this aspect of Barrett Browning’s poetry is influenced by Nancy Youssef’s *Romantic Intimacy*. Youssef thematizes the way in which an emphasis on the achieved instance of sympathy has led some critics to systematically occlude those relational processes that do not obtain to a perfect, impartial mirroring of feeling. “The irresistible teleology associated with sympathy, which seems inevitably to lead to querulous demands for intersubjective symmetry—be it the perception of similarity, the impression of equality, or the expectation of reciprocity—inevitably passes over or discounts moments and modes of relational experience that fall short of the aim but are not, thereby, failures or breakdowns of relationship—or even, perhaps, ethical or epistemic failures.” Nancy Youssef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2013) 3.

<sup>12</sup> Letters, 2:140, quoted in Linda Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Spiritual Progress – Face to Face with God* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1998), 2.

from classic sonnet sequences by Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser which present moments in the history of a love that longs for consummation and matrimony. Barrett Browning's sonnets are a similarly one-sided and intermittent series of moments, but they depict a relationship that has already been consummated in which both the lover and the beloved are poets. Throughout, the poems refer to the different ways in which each of the lovers are imagining the trajectory of their relationship. At the midpoint of the sequence, in sonnet XXVII, the speaker addresses her beloved as a poet with the ability to

touch on all the notes  
God set between his After and Before (ll.1-2).

She imagines two different ways in which he might use her in his poetry: as

a hope, to sing gladly? or a fine  
Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse?  
A shade, in which to sing—of palm or pine?  
A grave, on which to rest from singing? Choose. (ll.11-4)

This is a uniquely confrontational moment in the sequence, which provides its own evidence that there are other ways to write love poetry than these options, but it expresses the incommensurability of the lovers' perspectives on each other in way that subsequent poems never retract. The speaker sees more and more different aspects of her life and her past transformed by her love. She reads through their courtship correspondence until she reaches something that seems unrepeatable in sonnet XXVIII. In sonnets XXXIII and XLII, respectively, she thrills to her lover calling her by a pet-name from her youth and feels compelled to retract a line from one of her earlier poems.

There is a dialectic in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* between experiencing love as a rapturous state that shatters all narratives and experiencing it as a condition that assimilates everything into itself, all prior feelings and expectations. Yet both of these

dynamics heighten the sense that the lovers' perceptions of each other and themselves are continually shifting in response to each other, and not in unison. The last sonnet (XLIV) figures the "close room" of the sonnet as a sort of green house in which the speaker has transplanted flowers from her beloved. The sequence ends with her giving the beloved flowers to transplant into his heart, telling him to

Instruct thine eyes to keep their colors true,  
And tell thy soul their roots are left in mine. (ll.13-4)

As the concluding image of the sequence, it unites both the drive towards an earthy, tactile experience of closeness and the sense that whatever thoughts or feelings they're sharing, they are only shared by being displaced from one to the other, from one moment into another.

Intimacy is anachronizing. This is what Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* capture so well. There's the intense concentration of the sonnet, a moments monument, but always with an indication of some motion between them. These poems develop her desynchronization effects to a new level of complexity. It is as though Barrett Browning is giving us a series of tableaux, but tableaux that can't really be visualized all at once. The total intimacy of being face-to-face exists at moments, but as a state of rapturous impersonality. The rest of the time, Barrett Browning stations her lovers in relation to each other, often side-by-side but apprehending different things. In the simultaneous intimacy and difference between the lovers, she is depicting a labile present in which multiple histories coexist.

Double Vision from Casa Guidi Windows

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* is a diptych consisting of two views of the Italian Risorgimento from her window in Florence. Part I expresses her enthusiasm for the Italian uprisings of 1848; Part II, written in 1851, expresses her disillusionment in the wake of their failure. This attempt to write the history of the present is defined by its desynchronization effects: by amplifying the process of reacting to history, it records the differences among contemporaries as a divergence at the level of psychology. In earlier poems, Barrett Browning had expressed doubt about the possibility of people remaining in a state of perfectly shared sentiment, but her record of the uprisings of 1848 and their dissipation gives a broader social dimension to her doubts about relying on sustained emotional reciprocity. Part One consolidates the alternative that she's making to Carlyle, with the sociopolitical imperatives of the present derived from the feelings of the present, and not from the Natural Order and the primordial energies of Creation. Part One fulfils what Aurora Leigh gives as the explicit definition of double vision, the reapprehension of the present in an active response to historicism, but this revelatory encounter with the present in history is complicated by the suspicion of other people that becomes not just a principle but a discipline in Part Two.

In Part One of *Casa Guidi Windows*, Barrett Browning celebrates the uprising of 1848 because it offers the prospect of people sharing and collectively exercising subjective states, and not just as the righting of a historical wrong. The poem is informed by the republican tradition of civic virtue, an investment in the dispositions that allow a people to maintain an independent polity within the flux of human history. For Barrett Browning, the necessary virtue is a particular disposition towards the shared political project of the present. She distinguishes between the way in which the rest of Europe

treats Italy as a fallen woman with her best days behind her, “no nation but the poet’s pensioner” (l.170-212), and the potential for a more publicly-minded and therefore active relationship to Italian history. Barrett Browning finds suggestions of that more civically engaged historicism by looking to the Florentines of her day. It involves configuring the emotional and erotic energies of the present with a relationship to the personalities of the past.<sup>13</sup>

Part One of *Casa Guidi Windows* extends her desynchronization effects to the venerable dead who can have their own arresting effect on the present. The Florence of *Casa Guidi Windows* is stuffed with monuments and images—with them comes the danger that people can settle into a complacent and disingenuous relationship to an image of the past. Early on, she imagines someone theatrically mourning for Italy as the Juliet of nations, and then says,

behold instead,  
Void at Verona, Juliet’s marble trough:  
As void as that is, are all images  
Men set between themselves and actual wrong,  
To catch the weight of pity, meet the stress  
Of conscience,—since ‘tis easier to gaze long  
On mournful masks and sad effigies  
Than on real, live, weak creatures crushed by strong. (ll.41-8)

Barrett Browning condemns such a convenient tête-à-tête with a static image—Juliet is tragedy at its most glamorous and sentimental, and Barrett Browning displaces this image of lost youth by imagining her sarcophagus as a trough. To turn the poem away

---

<sup>13</sup> Mollie Barnes reads *Casa Guidi Windows* “as a self-conscious meditation on historiography, one that presents seemingly recursive moments non-linearly and sometimes non-sequentially.” For Barnes, the non-linearity of memory is connected to the ways in which a historical happening like the *Risorgimento* cannot be read as a straightforward sequence of events, but rather as overlapping processes. Barnes’s argument is consonant with mine, but has different commitments. Because I’m invested in thinking about the moral psychology of such historical self-reflexivity, I’m focused on the burdens and compromises of that reflexivity, as much as on its affordances. Mollie Barnes, “Historical Imagination in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Casa Guidi Windows*,” *Victorian Poetry*, 54:1 (Spring 2016), 40.

from such effigies of the past, she looks to the Arno as it “shoots on and cleaves the marble as it goes” (l.57) and “the mountains from without” that “in silence listen for the word said next” (ll.65-6). This image of Florence both flowing and static, both liquid and solid, ministers to her hope that it can “in aspiration keep undaunted” (l.72). Poems like “Grief” or “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim Point” abstract emotions and station them in sensuous form, as if they were sculptural groupings or tableaux. In Part One of *Casa Guidi Windows*, Barrett Browning complicates these representational strategies by trying to look upon the present at such a remove, without turning it into the kind of static image that already overcrowds visions of Italy.

Barrett Browning’s strategy isn’t to dispense with the past, but rather to develop a way of looking at it that will suggest the potential for new motion and motivation in the remnants of history. Michelangelo is the central exhibit for her argument about how we should receive the past. She doesn’t characterize his accomplishments as eternal so much as untimely. She says of his allegorical statues in the Medici Chapel,

Three hundred years his patient statues wait  
In that small chapel (ll.80-1),

and she describes how these representations of Day, Night, Dawn, and Twilight seem to carry their own feelings and intentions. These works of plastic art have their ultimate power not as physical objects nor as images, but as a sort of latency of feeling produced at the moment of artistic creation, persisting against the discouragements of political history. They appear as though

the veil withdrawn  
‘Twixt the artist’s soul and works had left them heirs  
Of speechless thoughts which would not quail nor fawn,  
Of angers and contempts, of hope and love (ll.88-91).

Even Michelangelo's greatest works are recast as suggestions of ideas and emotions that will continue to unfold in their own time.

In *Casa Guidi Windows*, the supreme and most extended image of Michelangelo is not one of him creating his greatest works, but of the legend in which he was made to “build a statue up in snow” and then watch it melt (l.100). She dwells on this legend for dozens of lines (ll.98-144). The function of the story is to dematerialize Michelangelo's work—not only because of the transience of the sculpture itself, but because the task was assigned to humiliate him and to demonstrate his dependence upon his patrons for his materials. Barrett Browning takes so long to draw him standing amid the melting snow, surrounded by the laughter of the aristocrats, because she wants to show him “laugh the laugh back” and

to read a wrong into a prophesy,  
And measure a great man's heritage  
Against a mere great-duke's posterity (ll.122-6).

The prophesy is that

The thought I threw into this snow shall stir  
This gazing people when their gaze is done;  
And the tradition of your act and mine,  
When all the snow is melted in the sun,  
Shall gather up for unborn men, a sign  
Of what is the true pryncedom (ll.138-43).

Barrett Browning is not only living a vicarious triumph for artists, but also showing how much of their effect depends upon reception over time, as opposed to the creation of stable images.

Michelangelo standing heroically next to his snowman inaugurates a pattern of imagery that continues through the rest of the poem where the solid monuments of the past have to be ventured in the fluidity of history. Already, the poem has opened with a

contrast between the dead effigies of Italy and the flowing river Arno and has depicted Juliet's tomb used as a trough, but there are repeated images of the dead past as dry and solid, while the present is fluid. Italy is criticized for having

too long swept  
Heroic ashes up for hour-glass sand (ll.188-9);

she tells the Dead that they

shall no longer cling to us  
With rigid hands of dessicating praise (ll.230-1);

instead she urges "through the blue Immense / Strike out all swimmers!" and "catch the freshening spray" (ll.398-401),

turn these lachrymals to use,  
And pour fresh oil in from the olive-grove,  
To furnish them as new lamps (ll.442-4),

and "prove the level of Italian veins" (l.469). Dry past and wet present suggest the familiar contrast between dead past and living present, but there's something more at stake.

The contrast between wet and dry results in the poem's central example of a healthy relationship to the past, its most hopeful image of 1848, and one of the poem's most surprising moments. Barrett Browning is thrilled to announce that when the people "went up to let / Their hearts out to that Duke" in an expression of popular support for the Risorgimento, they didn't do so "in the Loggia," and didn't do so "in the place beside / From that dim bust of Brutus" (ll.577-600). She describes the importance of these spots for twenty lines to emphasize how significant their final choice was:

Whom chose they then? Where met they?  
On the stone  
Called Dante's (ll.601-2).

It is called that because it is where he would “pour alone / The lava of his spirit when it burned” and the people’s choice shows that “it is not cold to-day” (ll.605-7). This is the spot where history is still molten and flowing.

It is significant, then, that the latent energies being expressed here are erotic. Every time that Barrett Browning refers to people congregating at Dante’s stone, she characterizes them as “trysting” (ll.580; 618; 651). Barrett Browning is both celebrating Dante’s return from exile and emphasizing the erotic energies that drove his poetry. She notes that his stone is a spot

for some  
Good lovers of our age to track and plough  
Their way to, through time’s ordures stratified (ll.629-31).

In this metaphor, the sordidness of lover’s assignations isn’t a result of their erotic desire, but rather of the filth of history, “time’s ordures stratified.” Barrett Browning goes so far as to remind us that Dante’s love was occasioned by a stray glance at a child on the street. As she is reciting to Dante his triumphs, she says,

Now Beatrix may leap up glad to cull  
Thy first smile, even in heaven and at her side,  
Like that which, nine years old, looked beautiful  
At May-game (ll.634-7)

before drawing even more attention to this by saying,

What do I say? I only meant  
That tender Dante loved his Florence well,  
While Florence, now, to love him is content (ll.637-9).

The erotics of the street, of secret trysts and surreptitious glances, is positioned at the center of Part One, not as a sufficient basis for civic virtue, but as the basis for her hopes that the people of Florence can still be publicly minded.<sup>14</sup>

The eroticism of public life, the passion and attachment, becomes the raw material out of which Barrett Browning expects the political present to be formed. Reflecting on the crowds trysting at Dante's stone, she says,

But if that day suggested something good,  
And bettered, with one purpose, soul by soul,—  
Better means freer. A land's brotherhood  
Is most puissant: men, upon the whole,  
Are what they can be,—nations, what they would (ll.656-60).

Barrett Browning's investment in political liberty as non-domination leads her to appeal to the transformative power of the general will, which has a capacity for agency that individuals do not. In what follows, Barrett Browning describes the need to supplement "popular passion" with

popular conscience, which may covenant  
For what it knows (ll.742-4).

That transformation calls for

some high soul, crowned capable to lead  
The conscious people, conscious and advised (ll.762-3)

someone

Inspiring into all this people round,  
Instead of passion, thought, which pioneers  
All generous passion (ll.769-71).

---

<sup>14</sup> In Virginia Woolf's delightful biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog *Flush*, she argues that Flush's sexual encounters on the streets of Florence lead him to overcome his obsession with aristocratic breeding and to take on a broader political spirit. Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography* (NYC: Harcourt, 1933), 124-8.

In the poem's call for heroic leadership, Barrett Browning is certainly influenced by Thomas Carlyle, but there is a more important resonance with Jean Jacques Rousseau's idea of the lawgiver, the man who occasions the possibility for the social contract without recourse to either force (which wouldn't initiate a social order) or reason (which would depend on one already existing).<sup>15</sup> Unlike in Carlyle, the possibilities of the present aren't recognized as the changing demands of the Natural Order, but rather as the adaptable desires of the people. Such is the freedom she is trying to claim for the shared present.

Part One is written in the absence of the hero or lawgiver or teacher who will pioneer all generous passion (ll.795-868), which makes its aspirations for the Risorgimento all the more dependent on the disposition with which people approach history. Barrett Browning can't give new life to Michelangelo or Dante, and the way to prevent them from being an inert effigy of the past is to trace out the life that they have had in people's psychic lives. That's an enriching way for a person to develop a sense of themselves as historically situated. It is not necessarily a reliable basis for people to bring those historical senses into some active connection with each other.

---

<sup>15</sup> In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau says, "For a nascent people to be capable of appreciating sound maxims of politics and of following the fundamental rules of reason of State, the effect would have to become the cause, the social spirit which is to be the work of the institution would have to preside over the institution itself, and men would have to be prior to laws what they ought to become by means of them. Thus, since the Lawgiver can use neither force nor reasoning, he must of necessity have recourse to an authority of a different order, which might be able to rally without violence and to persuade without convincing" (II.7). Barrett Browning was familiar with Rousseau, and with a range of radical political thought from the eighteenth century—for an amusing and characteristic reason. As she says in a letter to Robert: "Papa used to say. . . 'Dont read Gibbon's history—it's not a proper book. Dont read "Tom Jones"—& none of the books on *this* side, mind'! So I was very obedient and never touched the books on *that* side, & only read instead Tom Paine's Age of Reason, & Voltaire's Philosophical Dictionary, & Hume's Essays, & Werther, & Rousseau, & Mary Wollstonecraft . . . books, which I was never suspected of looking towards, & which were not 'on *that* side' certainly, but which did as well." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (NYC: Cambridge UP, 2007), 71; Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Letter to Robert Browning, January 15, 1846, *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: 1845-1846*, Vol 1, ed. Elvan Kintner, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), 392.

At the end of Part One, Barrett Browning seems to settle into the very thing she had criticized earlier in the poem, singing the glories of Italy's past, making it into the poet's pensioner; but here, Italy's past is the occasion for a greater self-reflexivity about the history of an individual psyche. She hails herself and her reader as

we,  
 Who loved Sorrentino vines in picture-book,  
 Or ere in wine-cup we pledged faith or glee,—  
 Who loved Rome's wolf with demi-gods at suck,  
 Or ere we loved truth's own divinity,—  
 Who loved, in brief, the classic hill and brook,  
 And Ovid's dreaming tales and Petrarch's song,  
 Or ere we loved Love's self even,—let us give  
 The blessing of our souls (ll.1190-8)

This passage makes love dependent on a process of familiarization, even habituation. The sensual pleasures of wine and the abstract pleasures of the spirit are both prepared for by fiction and art. Even love, as such, is lived out virtually before it's really felt. This is an idiosyncrasy of Barrett Browning's own biography, in which so much of her early exploration was made through reading, but it also lets her aspire to a certain detachment and control over eros. In fact, she is echoing a moment from her own reading of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (better known as *The Golden Ass*) that she translated and versified. It is the moment from the story of Cupid and Psyche, in which Psyche gazes upon Cupid for the first time, after they have had several nights together without her having looked upon him. After a long description of his body, Psyche reaches out to test the sharpness of his arrows and

pushed it in too deeply (foolish bride!)  
 And made her blood some dewdrops small distil,  
 And learnt to love Love, of her own goodwill (472-3).

Barrett Browning doesn't remove love from the realm of sensual fantasy, but she does make it into a gradual attainment by protracting it at such length. She has prepared herself to be face-to-face with the present.

## 2.2 Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Double Vision

Part One of *Casa Guidi Windows* enacts what Aurora Leigh defines as double vision. It cultivates a disposition for recognizing the present within history. The vision of the present that she is hailing is predicated on the hope that the Italian people will collectively claim the moment, even though she expresses doubts about the political figures who could play a leading role. There is a jarring tonal shift between the two parts, but Part Two doesn't really amount to a palinode or a correction to Part One, because Part One isn't naively trusting. It makes an extended argument about how people should refine their current enthusiasm, and it includes a lengthy discussion of how and why she's suspicious of the Pope, arguing that people shouldn't count on him to intervene in favor of Italian independence; furthermore, it attaches that suspicion to a broader principle, which is that you should keep in mind the institutional situation of people before relying on them. What is significant about Part Two is not that it retracts Part One or belatedly discovers the mutability of political commitments, but rather that it incorporates those doubts into the disposition that Barrett Browning is cultivating towards the present. Even though Aurora's definition of double vision echoes the call from Part One to attend to the present, the rest of her *ars poetica* and the rest of *Aurora Leigh* suggest how Barrett Browning comes to approach the present with a degree of preemptive estrangement from other people, which is more reminiscent of Part Two.

Part Two makes the phrase "from Casa Guidi windows" into a refrain by which she assembles the stages of her disappointment into a pattern and a discipline. The effect of preserving this disappointment in a sequence of moments is to make a disillusioning routine out of its instances. By repeatedly saying, "from Casa Guidi windows," she

gradually saps this position of its immediacy. Contrast this with the image of learning to love Love that closed Part One, moving steadily towards intimacy. In the sequence of looks out the window, earlier moments fade into the past and subsequent one's come to seem more and more provisional. In her earlier poems, her desynchronization effects are oriented towards detaching her poems from the temporality of the emotions that they represent and towards representing an intimacy that doesn't depend on perfect reciprocity. In Part Two of *Casa Guidi Windows*, she develops a mechanism for preempting the very desire to be in sync with other people's feelings.

In itself, such suspicion is wise—and perhaps more damning to the Risorgimento than Barrett Browning would ever recognize, given that it never sustained enough popular support to be realized without outside interventions dictated by the machinations of European geopolitics—but Barrett Browning doesn't arrive at a strategy for integrating that suspicion into a more active disposition towards the present.<sup>16</sup> Part Two feels like an intellectual dead-end because the discipline imposed by its poetics of redundancy doesn't lead anywhere. The problem is clearest at the poem's close. Barrett Browning remains committed to the idea of Italian independence in the form of national unification, even as she's hammered home that no popular basis currently exists for such a movement and that no public figure can be trusted with realizing it, so she turns to the only man whose politics she can trust, her two-year-old son Robert “Pen” Barrett Browning. Barrett Browning is essentially kicking the can down the road, not retreating into domesticity, because she's turning to Pen as an Italian and counting on him as her political executor. These tender feelings are not entirely different in their political function from the trysts

---

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the revisionist account of the Risorgimento, see David Gilmour, *The Pursuit of Italy: A History of a Land, its Regions, and their People* (NYC: FSG, 2012), 148-238.

that she describes in Part One, an unstable two-way connection between personal and political fulfillment.<sup>17</sup>

Part Two of *Casa Guidi Windows* doesn't resolve the problem of how to manage the connection between public history and the personal histories that shape everyone's participation in it, but it does develop a deeper understanding of how psychologically demanding such a resolution would be. Barrett Browning remains invested in trying to identify the appropriate disposition with which to participate in history, but her response to the failure of the revolution is to prioritize a suspicious and doubled view of human affairs:

Let no cry of patriot men  
Distract thee from the stern analysis  
Of masses who cry only ! keep thy ken  
Clear as thy soul is virtuous (ll.535-8).

Such estrangement needs to be practiced because there are always other people in our sympathies and our apprehensions of them are always tied up in our own desires. The key opposition isn't between self and other or public and private but intimate and detached. As such, the poem doesn't represent a turn from the collective to the individual—a shift that might imply a simple fall into quietism—but rather an emerging attention to the way

---

<sup>17</sup> Linda Lewis and Richard Bonfiglio both compellingly write about *Casa Guidi Windows* as violently internalizing particular visions of history. For Linda Lewis, the poem is an internalization of the eschatological energies in Christianity, “rejecting the doctrine of the end of the world in favor of the injunction to renovate and resurrect this present world.” “Ultimately, Barrett Browning believes the inner soul must be renovated before civic heroism can occur.” Similarly, Bonfiglio argues that the poem represents a masochistic internalization of both the violence of the period and the rhetoric of violence. “Caught between her sympathies for Italy and her desire for peaceful nonintervention, the poet redirects the revolutionary violence of Italy into a type of poetic violence inflicted on the trope and institution of the Victorian home itself.” Both of these authors capture the stringencies of both *Casa Guidi Windows* and Barrett Browning's thinking about history more generally. At the same time, they seem too focused on a dichotomy between internal and external. The poem's investment in psychology is almost invariably expressed at the level of the intersubjective. Linda Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1998), 13, 109. Richard Bonfiglio, “Liberal Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of the Heart(h): Mazzini, Gladstone, and Barrett Browning's Domestication of the Italian Risorgimento,” *Modern Philology*, 111:2 (November 2013), 305.

in which contemporaneous individuals can sustain multiple and conflicting relationships to history. *Aurora Leigh* echoes this second part of *Casa Guidi Windows*. It makes a virtue out of a self-reflexive resistance to feeling by treating poetry as a defamiliarizing medium. Barrett Browning's double vision from her Casa Guidi window introduces a suspicion into her social imaginings that shapes *Aurora Leigh* more broadly, both in its fearful, cynical depiction of crowds and in its sophisticated treatment of Marian's deception and abduction. Historical self-reflexivity acts as an impetus to psychological self-reflexivity, which becomes an analytical stance, a standard of sophistication, and a standing skepticism towards collective action.

#### A Second Look at Double Vision

Let's have a second look at *Aurora Leigh*'s account of double vision in Book Five of *Aurora Leigh* to see how it develops and transforms the concerns that Barrett Browning explores earlier in her career. Throughout, it is shaped by the need to manage the historicity of feeling, but that process is now modeled on the fundamental asynchrony of different people's feelings. The way in which two people's feelings unfold differently becomes the framework in which Barrett Browning imagines poetic detachment: not only "double vision," but also "the poet's twofold life," and the sense that "every age" is "double-faced." Earlier, we noted that double vision involves both ocular and tactile metaphors. Barrett Browning has something more in mind than a second look or a change of perspective. Her explanation of the term continually emphasizes the separateness of different people's feelings, a reality that she both struggles with and attempts to redeem as a way to practice a greater detachment from one's own susceptibilities. While double

vision imagines a particular way of relating to history, it is defined and motivated in terms of the poet's relations to other people. That process of configuration creates a tension between intimacy and detachment in relation to other people that corresponds to a tension between intimacy and detachment in relation to oneself.

Specifically, the process of playing out in oneself the dialectic between intimacy and detachment that exists between people allows a person to make one feeling substitute for another, to be out of sync with their own feelings without denying them.<sup>18</sup> In *A Drama of Exile*, Adam describes a prospect for enduring their "new apocalypse of sense" that involves their spirits climbing high so that

By reason of the passion of our grief,  
And, from the top of sense,  
[it] looked over sense  
To the significance and heart of things  
Rather than things themselves (ll.991-5).

In the discussion of double vision in *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora describes such a process of feeling past one's suffering into something emblematic, but here, the internal difference is modeled on the disparities in feeling that can exist between people. When she describes the poet's "twofold life" (5.381) in which "Art / Sets action on the top of suffering" (5.365-6), it is a process of

Transfixing with a special, central power

---

<sup>18</sup> Contrast this poetic procedure with Wordsworth's account of how the imagination is healed by "spots of time" in the *Prelude*. When describing how the imagination can be impaired, he describes the feeling of being dominated over by his sense of sight, which creates "A twofold Frame of body and of mind" (XI.170). A more desirable state would be one in which nature

summons all the senses each  
To counteract the other, and themselves,  
And makes them all, and the objects with which all  
Are conversant, subservient in their turn  
To the great ends of Liberty and Power (XI.176-84).

Barrett Browning's poetry makes different sensations counteract each other, but she embraces being in a twofold frame of body and of mind. William Wordsworth, "The Prelude," *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (NYC: Oxford UP, 2011), 563.

The flat experience of the common man,  
And turning outward, with a sudden wrench (5.368-70).

This distinction between the feelings of “the common man” and the feelings of the poet, which are nonetheless based on those common ones, is enacted within the poet’s life as it unfolds

’Twixt two incessant fires, – his personal life’s,  
And that intense refraction which burns back  
Perpetually against him from the round  
Of crystal conscience he was born into (5.376-9).

In this formulation of the poet’s twofold life, the fires of his own life are as external to him as those refracted back to him. The image of “crystal conscience” actively blurs the boundary between seeing outward and seeing one’s own light reflected back. The boundary is solid, the disconnection between people ineradicable, but the poet gains the power to transfix and wrench his feelings to the extent that he feels them no more personally than anyone else’s.<sup>19</sup>

While Aurora’s theory of poetics has her committed to hearkening after the experiences of other people, that process remains intransitive, an attention towards specific experiences more than an orientation towards specific people. We have already seen how Barrett Browning is attentive to the difficulties of remaining in a state of emotional reciprocity with another person, and those doubts persist here, but the hope of receiving personal validation is even more fraught in the context of *Aurora Leigh*. Indeed, the whole *ars poetica* in which Aurora lays out her theory of double vision is framed at its beginning and its end by her memories of Romney (5.56; 572). Romney,

---

<sup>19</sup> I’m influence here by a line from Stanley Cavell that becomes a motto for Andrew Miller’s *Burdens of Perfection*, that philosophy can teach us to take things intimately without taking them personally. Andrew Miller, *Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2008), 89, 106, 113.

with his characteristic obliviousness, has put her in a double bind by arguing that women are too focused on personal attachments to be capable of properly abstracted thought. On the one hand, to express her affection for Romney would enact just the sort of personal attachments that he is expressing disdain for, but to suppress those personal attachments would testify to her esteem for Romney's opinion. She reminds herself of his judgment early on (5.42-58), which leads her to declare,

I'll have no traffic with the personal thought  
In art's pure temple. Must I work in vain,  
Without the approbation of a man?  
It cannot be; it shall not. Fame itself,  
That approbation of the general race  
Presents a poor end. (5.61-6)<sup>20</sup>

At one point, Aurora plays out the tragic loneliness of the poetess, which Barrett Browning had depicted with such incisive detachment in "L. E. L.'s Last Question." She says,

How dreary 'tis for women to sit still  
On winter nights by solitary fires  
And hear the nations praising them far off,  
Too far! (5.439-42)

She compares this combination of distant fame and personal loneliness to the position of a hungry child being told that he'll inherit "many corn-fields," and notes:

So with us;  
(Here, Romney, too, we fail to generalize!)  
We're hungry (5.483; 486-8).

---

<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, she preempts the judgment of the masses during a long condemnation of the contemporary stage (5.237-343). She wonders,

If virtue done for popularity  
Defiles like vice, can art, for praise or hire,  
Still keep its splendor and remain pure art? (5.258-60)

And she notes that a poet shouldn't complain about his reception, because

then, besides five hundred nobodies,  
He'll have five thousand and five thousand more  
Against him (5.286-8).

The poem's relationship to its reader remains indefinite, not only because of the exigencies of reception and the asynchrony of writing and reading, but also because Aurora's poetic ambitions are bordered on one side by the unknowable, unappeasable masses and on the other by the abjection of depending on one person.

The intimacy that she does affirm as characteristic of poetry is dislocated in time: it is a sense that someone else has shared or could share in a feeling. When Aurora tries to take comfort in her loneliness, she envisions a father giving one of her books to his son to read in future seasons (5.456-76) and imagines how

Affianced lovers, leaning face to face  
With sweet half-listenings for each other's breath  
Are reading haply from a page of ours,  
To pause with a thrill (as if their cheeks had touched)  
When such a stanza, level to their mood,  
Seems floating their own thought (5.449-51).

In this compensatory fantasy, the lovers aren't looking at each other, but rather at Aurora's book, and their intimacy is registered in terms of passive, bodily proximity: "leaning," "half-listenings for each other's breath," "as if their cheeks had touched." This is reminiscent of an earlier image of intimacy from Book One, in which she describes how her father gave her everything he had in her education, "like any man / Who loves but one, and so gives all at once" (1.719-20). She says that,

What my father taught before  
From many a volume, Love re-emphasized  
Upon the self same pages: Theophrast  
Grew tender with the memory of his eyes (1.710-3).

In these passages, as in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, intimacy isn't figured as an experience of reciprocity, but rather as a feeling of intense but indirect and intermittent connection.

Such an understanding and representation of intimacy forms the sense for the historicity of feeling that is crucial to her conception of double vision. Her theorization of double vision works as a corrective to an initial expression of poetic ambition that aspires to instantly and directly unite itself with all feelings. At the beginning of Book Five, Aurora's vision of poetic success is one in which feelings are perfectly transposable across time and person-to-person. She tells herself to "be humble" and asks herself whether she shall hope

To speak my poems in mysterious tune  
With man and nature? – with the lava-lymph  
That trickles from successive galaxies  
Still drop by drop adown the finger of God  
In still new worlds? (V.2-6)

This vision of poetic creation as spoken "with the lava-lymph" recalls her description of Dante's stone in *Casa Guidi Windows* as the place where he would "pour alone / The lava of his spirit when it burned" and where "it is not cold today" (233, ll.605-7). Yet by aligning cosmic creation with bodily excretion, the aspiration to speak "with the lava-lymph / That trickles [...] drop by drop" aligns with the desire to speak "in mysterious tune" with the phases of the natural world, not only with the four seasons, emblematically described, but also

beyond  
With the human heart's large seasons, when it hopes  
And fears, joys, grieves, and loves? – with all that strain  
Of sexual passion (5.6-15).

This tremendous parallelism between cosmos, seasons, and emotions would even align with the phases of a person's life,

with mother's breasts  
Which, round the new-made creatures hanging there,  
Throb luminous and harmonious like pure spheres (5.16),

and

With multitudinous life, and finally  
With the great escapings of ecstatic souls (5.19-20).

The hope is not only to speak her poems in alignment with all of these processes as they unfold on their various scales, but also to

[...] speak my verse  
So plainly in tune to these things and the rest,  
That men shall feel it catch them on the quick,  
As having the same warrant over them  
To hold and move them if they will or no,  
Alike imperious as the primal rhythm  
Of that theurgic nature (5.24-30)

Aurora is describing this fantasy of expressing a poetry that synchronizes all feelings with itself and with the cosmos, but she is expressing it in the negative as something she has not yet been able to do, even for one reader, Romney. It is a vision of poetic success made up of many ambitions that others have articulated on their own—the desire to represent a season or a mood, the desire to move a person. Strung together in a single, thirty-line-long run-on, the conflation of these different aspirations comes to seem like a mockery of poetic ambition. The idea of being able to synchronize everyone’s feelings with and through one’s poetry is posited as the uncritical, pretheorized desire from which the rest of Aurora’s *ars poetica* will make its departure.

And indeed, we can see the difference that her theory of “double vision” makes, because she returns to the images of this opening passage immediately after the verse paragraph that articulates that concept. After reminding herself that King Arthur was “commonplace” to Lady Guinevere, and that Camelot “seemed as flat” to minstrels as Fleet Street to her contemporaries, she exhorts herself:

Never flinch,

But still, unscrupulously epic, catch  
 Upon the burning lava of a song  
 The full-veined, heaving double-breasted Age:  
 That, when the next shall come, the men of that  
 May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say  
 ‘Behold, – behold the paps we all have sucked!  
 This bosom seems to beat still, or at least  
 It sets ours beating: this is living art,  
 Which thus presents and thus records true life.’ (5.213-22)

This passage seems to capture in its most condensed form the way in which Barrett Browning cultivates the feeling of history by managing the historicity of feeling. As in *Casa Guidi Windows*, matter shifting between liquid and solid is used as a figure for the relationship between past and present, where what is still fluid is still alive. Yet here, the “full-veined” body’s “heaving” breast, full of blood and air, has its living form arrested in lava. Like the “lava-lymph” from the beginning of Book Five, this conflation links the familiar scene of nursing to the primordial formation of the universe. It also gives creative power to the process of nursing rather than conception. The scene of appreciation is so totally displaced from the scene of creation that both the poem and the infant seem to have disappeared. Where poetic creation was like feeding from the breasts of the Age, the “living art” that results is now identified with the “double-breasted Age” itself. And the people who appreciate the art identify themselves as having sucked at the same “paps.” Like the metaphors in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, these are presented to us in a scene, as though they were making a tableau, but one that can’t actually be visualized all at once. Its exposition suggests a tactile intimacy, but their relationships link together several different abstractions. These strange metaphors that connect different, incommensurate frames of temporality index the dialectic of intimacy and estrangement

that is so central to Barrett Browning's poetics and her understanding of our relationship to history.

[Blank]-by-[Blank]: The Ongoing Present in *Aurora Leigh*

*Aurora Leigh* has a peculiar relationship with temporality; while it is primarily narrated in the past tense, the confident retrospection of the first five books is displaced after the *ars poetica* of Book Five when Aurora describes the party she has gone to that night. From here on out, the narrative moves through a succession of new present moments. *Aurora Leigh* doesn't just attend to contemporary life at the level of content, but also takes up the management of the present-tense as one of its central formal problems, both at the local level and at the level of the text as a whole. Having introduced us to Aurora and the central characters in her life, the verse-novel makes its ongoing present surprisingly disjunctive to emphasize the way in which Aurora has multiple relationships to history shaped by the multiple relationships in her life.

Consider one of the earliest and most jarring moments in which the poem abruptly shifts into the present-tense. In the lines leading up to this moment, Aurora has been "musing with myself / On life and art" (6.204-5) particularly about what relationship her work might have to other people. She prays that

the poet and philanthropist  
(Even I and Romney) may stand side by side,  
Because we both stand face to face with men (6.199-201).

This is Barrett Browning's ideal relationship with the present: the intimacy of being side-by-side with someone combined with the spiritual intensity of being face-to-face with something indefinite, but sublime. It will recur at *Aurora Leigh*'s end. While holding out

this hope for maintaining her vocation and orienting herself to the people, she refers to the higher pretensions of the poet's role, adding,

we thunder down  
We prophets, poets, – Virtue's in the *word*! (6.217-8)

It is in this context, aspiring to the privilege of the poet and hoping to see and understand “the people in the rough” that she really does come “face to face” with someone in the rough. Her reverie is interrupted, such that it coincidentally pivots on Romney, but reorients her thought away from herself. As she contrasts their self-proclaimed vocations, she thinks,

Yet Romney leaves me . . .  
God what face is that?  
O Romney, O Marian! (6.226-7)

Here, two metrical lines are presented split apart as dropped lines. The second, which begins by interjecting the names, picks up again by adding,

Walking on the quays  
And pulling thoughts to pieces leisurely,  
As if I caught at grasses in a field  
And bit them slow between my absent lips  
And shred them with my hands . . . (6.228-31).

Initially, “Walking on the quays / And pulling thoughts to pieces” could refer to Marian's effect on Aurora's contemplation, but her focus shifts back to a debased, highly material, and yet emptied self-image, one that feeds on the grasses like an animal. This sudden, alienated moment of self-reflection ends with another dropped line, which picks up by reorienting itself towards Marian's face, but this time as a sensation acting upon the mind:

What face is that?  
What a face, what a look, what a likeness! Full on mine  
The sudden blow of it came down, till all

My blood swam, my eyes dazzled. Then I sprang . . . (6.231-4).

After imagining the prophetic poet thundering down, Aurora finds that “the sudden blow of [Marian’s appearance] came down.” This sequence tracks the fleeting interruptions and twists of thought at the level of the metrical line, which can break off in the middle and use seeming continuities between those ruptures to emphasize the deeper readjustments of thought.

In *Aurora Leigh*, the process of attending to the ongoing present consistently requires her to simultaneously confront the disjunctions in her relationship with herself and in her relationships with other people. When she visits her childhood home in Italy, the experience is disturbing, and she concludes that her parents

live too far above, that I should look  
So far below to find them (7.1148-9).

Her relationship with her parents is retrospective, but it can only carry on to the extent that she can imagine how they occasionally and silently

drop upon me, now and then,  
For token or for solace (7.1112-3)

in the present. The split temporality of this relationship with her parents gives way to a similar mix of intimacy and estrangement regarding the history of the place itself. She addresses the Italian countryside by saying,

O land of all men’s past! for me alone,  
It would not mix its tenses. I was past,  
It seemed, like others, – only not in heaven (7.1157-9).

This highly suggestive comment asserts that to be fully in the present requires a capacity to mix one’s tenses. Such an active blending of temporal orientations would allow one to govern the different scales of time that one’s life is involved in.

*Aurora Leigh* has a repeated formulation for the processes that unfold in an ongoing present, “[blank] by [blank].” It is a symptom of how the verse-novel and its characters are obsessed with processes unfolding without a certainty about where they will lead.<sup>21</sup> One in particular tracks the difficulty these characters have staying present with each other. “Day by day” repeatedly refers to the way in which people come to believe in the reality of their relationships through repetition and continuity, sometimes to disastrous effect. Initially, Marian refers to the fact that Romney returns “day by day” to reassure herself that he is not displeased with her after she insists on keeping Lucy with them (4.98). Near the end of the verse-novel, after Aurora describes her first kiss with

---

<sup>21</sup> For example, when Romney describes the failure of his rationalizations, he acknowledges the need for a spiritual counterpart to all things,

rounding all  
To justice and perfection, *line by line*,  
*Form by form*, nothing single nor alone (8.619-21).

Similarly, when Aurora discusses the tendency for the French to emphasize first principles and for the English to resist them, she says the latter are

untrained  
To trace the involutions, *valve by valve*,  
In each orb'd bulb-root of a general truth (6.39-41).

But such attempts to achieve a more authoritative logic can also be misleading. Romney dismisses his own misled attempts to improve the world by saying of himself that he,

hastes  
By *line on line* to draw you out a world,  
Without your help indeed, unless you take  
His yoke upon you and will learn from him (8.771-4).

Early on, Aurora criticizes Romney by saying,

fix against heaven's wall  
Your scaling ladders of high logic—mount  
*Step by step!*—Sight goes faster (1.808-10)

and when Aurora kisses Marian, it's because

She, at least,  
Was not built up as walls are, *brick by brick* (4.352-3).

Yet Aurora is not willing to do away with the image of ascending to perfection by a series of increments, which she naturalizes as

Flower from root,  
And spiritual from natural, *grade by grade*  
In all our life (9.649-50).

As we saw, she even criticizes her own poetic aspirations by asking herself if she expects to speak with the lava-lymph

That trickles [...] Still *drop by drop* adown the finger of God (V.3-5).

These “[blank] by [blank]” formulations speak to a central problem in *Aurora Leigh*, the difficulty of giving form to an ongoing present.

Romney as the highest, most disorienting ecstasy, she adds, “But what he said . . . I have written day by day” (9.725). She refers to these records as “the heart’s sweet scripture” (9.731). If trust can be produced by steadily adding time to time, it can also be counterfeited. After Marian disappears, it is discovered that Lady Waldemar has been the only other visitor that Marian has received besides Romney, and that she

had been with her, it appeared,  
At first from week to week, then day by day (4.1042-4).

When Marian later reports what Lady Waldemar had been telling her when she visited, “day to day” (6.1140), one of the central arguments used to lead her away from marrying Romney was the claim that

If day by day he had to bend his height  
To pick up sympathies, opinions, thoughts,  
And interchange the common talk of life  
[...] His days were heavily taxed (6.1028-32).

This is, of course, an insidiously effective line of argument, because Marian can only trust in Romney’s affection for her to the extent that she can project forward from the continuity of their current relationship, day-by-day, into an imagined future. Marian’s faith in Romney and her betrayal by Lady Waldemar are both produced out of the imperceptibly gradual repetitions of the ongoing present.

Where Lady Waldemar is referred to as “that bad guide” (6.1170), the central question for Books 6-8 is how Aurora and Marian can act as superior guides for each other in their uncertain, unfolding present. When they are initially re-united in Paris, there is no conventionally novelistic aim available to either of them. Alison Case has noted that *Aurora Leigh* develops two plots simultaneously, a retrospective *Kunstlerroman*, in which Aurora is the authoritative narrator of her own development, and a marriage plot,

in which “she reveals to the reader, through the twists and turns of her more immanent and less self-aware narration, the self-delusions and misunderstandings which the plot will clear away to make possible her reunion with Romney.”<sup>22</sup> At this point in the verse-novel, a first time reader would have no reason to assume the marriage-plot’s return for either Marian or Aurora, and her literary work seems to have come to a standstill.<sup>23</sup>

Shortly after their reunion in Paris, Aurora’s narration repeats a phrase to describe the guidance that each is providing to the other. At first, Aurora says that Marian is following her

closely where I went,  
As if I led her by a narrow plank  
Across devouring waters (6.481-3),

and then when Marian announces that she needs to get home, the roles reverse and Aurora follows her,

as by a narrow plank  
Across devouring waters, [...]  
Stepping by her footsteps, breathing by her breath,  
And holding her with eyes that would not slip (6.501-4).

This is an appealing vision of responsiveness, especially with its closing notes of intimacy and tenderness, step by step and breath by breath, but it is also shaped by a state of emergency, by their awareness of “devouring waters.” When Marian describes her travels before her abduction and rape, she refers to “the blessed unaccustomed trees and fields” which

Ran either side the train like stranger dogs

---

<sup>22</sup> Alison Case. “Gender and Narration in *Aurora Leigh*.” *Victorian Poetry* Vol 29 No 1 (Spring 1991). 17-8.

<sup>23</sup> Case identifies an early review that complained about the disjunction between Aurora’s claim, as narrator, that she didn’t love Romney when he proposed, “nor since . . . / Nor ever” and her later declaration to Romney that “I loved you always.” As Case notes, the problem here is not that Aurora is an unreliable narrator; it is that she was playing the part of a reliable narrator when she made that remark, only to supersede her own earlier position. Case 20.

Unworthy of notice (6.1188-90);

any note of menace in the views flanking her like “stranger dogs” is muted, even “blessed.” After she has been abducted and raped, she describes the trees lining the country road as

long thin poplar-lines  
Like fingers of some ghastly skeleton Hand (6.1242-3).

It is easier to be alert, to be present, to walk a path in unison when danger is so apparently aligned on either side.

The difficulty of remaining present with another person becomes more fraught—and more characteristic of the verse-novel’s central problems—once they are together in relative safety. Shortly after that tender moment in which Aurora lets Marian lead the way, she spends two hundred lines assuming that Marian’s baby is a sign of her guiltiness and harshly berating her for it, before ultimately admitting that she was wrong (6.583-780). Aurora’s assumption lends a grotesque intensity to her perception of Marian and her baby: she describes Marian as “drinking him as wine” (6.599), for example, and says that she

damps her baby's cheeks by kissing them,  
As we kill roses (6.735-6).

Even after letting Marian tell her story, Aurora still has trouble remaining responsive to her in a shared present, rather than letting her own judgments and assumptions overpower Marian. Aurora tells her,

in my Tuscan home I'll find a niche  
And set thee there, my saint, the child and thee,  
And burn the lights of love before thy face,  
And ever at thy sweet look cross myself  
From mixing with the world's prosperities (7.126-8);

If the characterization of Marian as “my saint” initially seems incidental, the next line confirms that Aurora is describing a shrine and leaving Marian only one message to repeat. A little later, Aurora’s narration has one of its occasional reversions to the present-tense, letting us know that Marian is in the other room as she writes these things in their Tuscan home (7.139), and her arrival in this simple, predicted present has already left Aurora with the burden of planning for a more complicated future.

The relay race of maintaining one’s intimacy with a person moment-to-moment, [blank]-by-[blank], is an attempt to forge a bulwark against the changefulness of people, but an inherently vulnerable one, because it can be falsely imitated by a manipulator, because it can make someone depend upon hearkening back in the way that Aurora does towards her father and Romney, and because it’s hard to keep up. Nonetheless, this process of configuration is central to Barrett Browning’s attempt to engage with the present in history.

### The Verse-Novel and the Monologue

Considered *as a novel*, one of the key formal peculiarities of *Aurora Leigh* is that it has so little that could be described as dialogue. Set aside the essayistic passages: even scenes that unfold between two characters tend to center around lengthy speeches. These speeches often describe events in the past tense, although we are reminded of the ongoing present of the narrative by the interruptions and misunderstandings that shape their position in the larger verse-novel. *Aurora Leigh* is more a book of vying monologues than of narration and dialogue. That is, it’s not so much an attempt to write a novel in verse as it is a confrontation between the monologue form and the heterogeneity of

modern life as it had been brought out by novels. Barrett Browning could have written more dialogue in verse: it wouldn't have sounded like contemporary speech, but it could have recreated more of the rhythms of conversation. By choosing instead to have such frequent recourse to monologue she draws more attention to the difficulty of mediating multiple relationships to history and multiple responsibilities to other people. These formal features of the verse-novel register the difficulties of cultivating double vision as a reflexive virtue that depends on such a finely drawn and subtle form of configuration with other people.

The verse-novel is created out of heightening the social dimensions of the monologue form in order to capture multiple, incommensurate scenes of address and reception. The clearest example of this formal method is Marian's account of her abduction and rape. When she is finally allowed to tell her story, it is a necessarily limited and disorienting account in ways that reflect her betrayal and abuse—the most horrible part of her story is necessarily foreclosed, because she was drugged and traumatized. Her account is governed by the conceit that she was murdered, which is initially her retort to Aurora's claim that she was seduced (6.769-71). Yet even as she says that she "waked up in the grave" (6.1218), she also retains the capacity for ironic critique that is so central to the monologue form. She immediately follows this by concluding,

Enough so! – it is plain enough so. True,  
 We wretches cannot tell out all our wrong  
 Without offense to decent happy folk.  
 I know that we must scrupulously hint

With half-words, delicate reserves, the thing

Which no one scrupled we should feel in full (6.1219-1224)

This ironic interruption is followed by her dazed journey through the French countryside, and Barrett Browning preserves its form as a set-piece by ending Book Six while she is still in the middle of her narration. Thus, Book Six concludes powerfully with her last appeal to the conceit of murder and burial:

I, Marian Erle, myself, alone, undone,

Facing a sunset low upon the flats

As if it were the finish of time,

The great red stone upon my sepulchre

Which angels were too weak to roll away. (6.1270-4)

At the beginning of the next book, Marian gives her concluding denunciation of Lady Waldemar and describes the discovery of her pregnancy, but by breaking the story between the two books where she does, Barrett Browning makes Marian's story something like a self-contained poetess poem in the middle of the larger verse-novel.

In *Aurora Leigh*, the rough edges of the monologue form are central to its depiction of the present, both at the level of content and form. It shows the ways in which people's feelings have their own histories. Though they draw near to each other at times, there's a deeper incommensurability that inevitably returns. In his book on nineteenth-century epic poetry, Herbert Tucker describes *Aurora Leigh*'s exploration of the monologue form and the present tense with reference to the Spasmodist movement. "The neediness of bodily desire in *Aurora Leigh* also whets the edge of story, in what may be the poem's finest stroke of diegetic invention: the temporal procession of the narrative

standpoint. [...] This arresting interlude brings *Aurora Leigh* as close as narrative can well come to the real-time present of Spasmodist closet-drama and its affinities with radically bardic presentation values. [...] The fixed omniscience of the memoirist has yielded to the stepwise nomadism of a diary.”<sup>24</sup> The program of spontaneous expression driven by the Spasmodist movement heightens a tension that exists throughout Barrett Browning’s career. Compared to her contemporaries, she is not nearly as invested in the monologue either as a form conducive to identification (a mode explored by Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, and Alfred Lord Tennyson among others) or ironic detachment (a mode explored by Robert Browning and particularly definitive of the monologue form in later generations).<sup>25</sup> Already in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Barrett Browning had focused on representing the subtle processes of feeling more and less close to another person. *Aurora Leigh*, with its characters largely speaking in monologue, and often speaking past each other, highlights the difficulty with which its characters get in and out of sync with each other.

“we who have no prescience”

*Aurora Leigh* ends with Aurora and Romney Leigh standing side-by-side, looking out towards the dawn, which Aurora characterizes as the image of the New Jerusalem. Appeals to Jerusalem, old or new, are generally the signal of something presumptuous, and this is no exception. But the way in which the verse-novel sets up this final prospect

---

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Tucker, *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (NYC: Oxford UP, 2008), 380-1.

<sup>25</sup> Her greatest dramatic monologue, “A Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” is idiosyncratic among Victorian monologues for the formal features discussed above. In many ways, it thwarts the reader from emotionally identifying with the speaker by the circuitry with which its narrative is given and by the way in which its most vivid images are presented at a remove. At the same time, the speaker is evidently aware and in control of the bitter ironies suggested by her experiences.

encapsulates a key part of what's remarkable about the relationship to history that Barrett Browning cultivates in her work.

Initially, she compares the words that Romney says to her to the speech of angels, not only because she finds them revelatory, but because she's too close to actually hear them:

His breath against my face  
Confused his words, yet made them more intense (9.743-4).

The approach to philanthropy and poetry that they agree on is one with

fewer programmes, we who have no prescience.  
Fewer systems, we who are held and do not hold, (9.865-6),

but this abandonment of grand projects (on Romney's part) for lack of "prescience" is counterbalanced by the claim that their work will meet a different standard:

men who work can only work for men,  
And, not to work in vain, must comprehend  
Humanity and so work humanly (9.850-2).

The comprehension of humanity that they're claiming is supposedly validated by the intense intimacy that they're feeling with each other. Aurora argues that "the man, most man, / Works best for men," and that a man is most a man when he serves "Love, the soul of soul, within the soul, Evolving it sublimely" (9.874-81) Romney takes up the idea and hails the range of loves "all reddened, sweetened from one central Heart," including

Loves filial, loves fraternal, neighbor-loves  
And civic (9.887-90).

In *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Barrett Browning describes intimacy in modes less rapturous and simplifying than this, and she takes a more skeptical view of civic love in Part Two of *Casa Guidi Windows*. What's more, the rest of *Aurora Leigh* suggests how contingent such moments of intimacy are. Though the novel ends with them looking out

to the same dawn, Romney has lost his sight at this point and it is Aurora who interprets it as the New Jerusalem. Two can share a vision if one is blind.

*Aurora Leigh*'s closing tableau of two lovers standing side by side, face-to-face with the New Jerusalem cannot be happily celebrated when it's viewed at a remove, but it does represent something new and important in the moral psychology of historicism. This tableau means something different than Adam and Eve standing side by side as they leave Eden in *Paradise Lost* or Barrett Browning's own *Drama of Exile*. The future that they're looking to is hailed in the language of eschatology, but it isn't licensed by divine authority. Rather they will "subsist no rules of life outside of life" (9.870). Even Christ's role as lawgiver is subordinated to the example of his life (9.871-3). Nor is it like the end of "Tintern Abbey," where the speaker is predicting that the scenes which they see will one day mean the same things to his sister that they do to him. Though Romney predicts that someday there

shall grow spontaneously  
New churches, new œconomies, new laws  
Admitting freedom, new societies  
Excluding falsehood (9.946-9),

there's no indication of what the New Jerusalem will be like, except that it will be achieved by this heightened and reverent disposition towards the shared present. Intimacy is valued within a process oriented towards some indefinite end: the end preserves the intimacy by giving the lovers something other than themselves to apprehend. At the same time, by keeping the end indefinite, by refusing a more schematic relationship to history, the present is revived, given more dimensions. The feeling of history that results is implicitly contingent, gathered out of the shifting intimacies that people feel in the course of their lives.

Later in the nineteenth century, the image of two people standing side by side, looking outward to some indefinite prospect, rather than at each other, will become a figure for developing one's affinity with someone without coercing or constraining them. The outward orientation can be read as a relief from the frontal, mirroring stance of being face to face, which is so often an image of emotional reciprocity. Walter Pater describes the Renaissance as one of those "eras of more favorable conditions, in which the thoughts of men *draw nearer together than is their wont*" and in which "personalities, many-sided, centralized, complete [...] *catch light and heat from each other's thoughts*," their influence given tactile but immaterial form as a detached effusion.<sup>26</sup> Oscar Wilde, writing to Bosie after his time in prison, says, "Always write to me about your art and the art of others. It is better to meet on the double peak of Parnassus, than elsewhere."<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche after revaluing the term "love" as possessiveness adds, "There is probably a kind of continuation of love in which this greedy desire of two people for each other gives way to a new desire and greed, a *shared* higher thirst for an ideal above them."<sup>28</sup> In the absence of either conventional morality or a binding relationship to history of the kind that Carlyle attempted to urge upon his readers, the shifting intimacies of the present can come to seem infinite in their possibilities—including the possibility of coercion or alienation. *Aurora Leigh* is perhaps the earliest, richest depiction of the present rediscovered after an encounter with historicism.

---

<sup>26</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1980), xxiv, my emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> Oscar Wilde, "Letter to Lord Alfred Douglass" (? 2 June 1897 from Hotel de la Plage, Berneval-sur-Mer), *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (NYC: Harcourt, 1962), 589.

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans Josefine Nauckhoff (NYC: Cambridge UP, 2001), 41.

### 3.1: George Eliot – Sympathy as a Sacrifice to History

The complex moral psychology of George Eliot's historicism is perhaps best encapsulated in "A Minor Prophet," a poem written in 1865 in the middle of her career as a novelist. The poem culminates in one of Eliot's many depictions of how sympathy can positively structure a person's relationship to their sociohistorical situation. It demonstrates much of what contemporary critics admire about Eliot's ethical thinking, but its frame suggests a challenge that Eliot still felt the need to resolve. It introduces this familiar tribute to the benefits of sympathy as a necessary corrective to its titular modern prophet, Elias, and his vision of a coming utopia, in which vegetarianism and evolution will expand human control over the "Thought-Atmospheres," unleashing human brainpower to such an extent that we will be able to telekinetically shape conditions on Earth and subordinate all of nature (ll.43-87).<sup>1</sup> Positioned against this ineffectual maniac, Eliot's vignette of lowly sympathy has a rather unfair advantage. So what does this strawman represent, and why is Eliot burning an effigy of it? Elias is not invoked to ridicule a belief in the world's perfectibility, which the speaker affirms (ll.217-22), but rather to travesty the hope that individual minds can transcend the immanent conditions of their existence to have a shaping effect on history.

Even though that aspiration towards transcendence is initially presented in the form of outlandish utopianism, the poem makes its ultimate argument against a far more popular and familiar form of it—the Victorian cult of heroism most powerfully theorized by Thomas Carlyle. In Carlyle's account, heroic individuals are able to move history

---

<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, "A Minor Prophet," *The Spanish Gypsy, the Legend of Jubal, and Other Poems Old and New* (Honolulu, HI: UP of the Pacific, 2003) 561-76. All subsequent citations to this poem will be parenthetical by line number.

precisely because there is a continuity between their minds and the demands of their historical moments, so that ideas originating in their minds can alter the course of collective history. They become inflection points in larger historical processes. The poem's most substantial rejoinder to its modern prophet is the extended vignette in which a "patched and plodding citizen" watches the parade of "some victorious world-hero," but comes to feel more affinities for the other people in the crowd, which sends him into a reverie that complexly renders the social history of his psyche (ll.223-5). The speaker tells us that

Perhaps the hero's deeds *have helped* to bring  
                   A time when every honest citizen  
 Shall wear a coat unpatched (ll.237-9; my emphasis),

which is a notably cautious, circumspect tone for a scenario that has essentially been conjured up as a thought-experiment: it's as if the hero's precise contribution remains hard to confirm even from a future standpoint. The hero enters and leaves the poem as a cipher, while we slowly gather together a sentimental history of the patched and plodding citizen. The public procession of the world-historical hero is absorbed into the progress of one person's thoughts and feelings: the ongoing development of this individual's psychology becomes the triumphal march of the poem. Though a patchwork, the warm verisimilitudes accumulated in her depiction of the citizen overwhelm the wish for a history-transcending hero, which is reduced to a thin abstraction.

Crucially, though, the poem is destabilized by the ungainliness of Eliot's efforts to cast out the hope of transcendence, not only in the jarring tonal mismatch between the sentimental depiction of the citizen and the silly, contrived satire of Elias, but also in the strange and troubling metaphors by which it tries to conclude its argument for our

confinement to immanent conditions. At the poem's end, she tells us that faith in the perfectibility of the world

Is but the rushing and expanding stream  
Of thought, of feeling, fed by all the past (ll.291-2).

But this is not a stream with which we can travel, nor is it a stream that people can share in common. It is, instead, an intermittent influx surging upon individuals from many sources.

Full souls are double mirrors, making still  
An endless vista of fair things before  
Repeating things behind: so faith is strong  
Only when we are strong [...]  
With influx new that makes new energies (l.295-301).

If each of us looks at the prospects for a better world through a double mirror, we are not isolated, *per se*, but all of those influences that could be shared in common—the “noble and [...] gentle deeds,” the “labours of the master-artist's hand,” the “moments of heroic love,” and so on (ll.303-7)—are only effective when they outflash the flickering image of our own partialities. In the poem's final image,

Presentiment of better things on Earth  
Sweeps in with every force that stirs our soul

like the gravitational waves from “far-off orbs” that make the tides (ll.316-25). Hope moves us with the undeniable reality of a physical force—a confidence that doesn't answer any of the doubts that one can cast on all of hope's particular objects. These images epitomize Eliot's argument, but they don't demonstrate the consolation that she was able to depict in the image of a citizen reposing on his happy associations.

The prospect of being a part of the slow improvement of the human race is the preeminent means by which Eliot dignifies a self-reflexivity that cannot make any

profound departures from the social roles available to a given person; anyone can participate in history, even as it becomes unclear whether individuals can claim any special authority over how they've affected the wider world. The poem's speaker says that

every change upon this earth  
Is bought with sacrifice,

and makes this claim the hinge by which she launches into her account of the citizen's personal history. But if the hero or the citizen has made a sacrifice, the poem effaces it, and it is avowedly noncommittal about whether they have bought anything by it.

The sacrifice that the poem actually depicts is an abandonment of the idea that an individual can become an historical agent. It not only gives a skeptical depiction of this idea of heroism, in which individual psychologies are incorporated into history as the primary causes of major shifts, but it also displaces heroism by actively embracing a more fragmentary and indefinite relationship to history. The poem recasts the partialities and the limitations that have come with the citizen's interpersonal relationships as the individuating feature of his ethical life. By making sympathy into a reflexive virtue, the patched and plodding citizen has been able to embrace the patchwork of his personal history as though it were the record of an active choice. These are two sides of the sacrifice of Eliot's self-reflexivity: an abandonment of an earlier vision of self-reflexivity that had seen individual psychology incorporated into history, which, in turn, motivates an attempt to recast the partialities and limitations that come with one's interpersonal relationships as though they were a deliberately chosen sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Eliot's tendency to take up the partialities and limitations that inevitably shape us as though they were a deliberate choice claims a kind of retroactive continuity in a way that has significant resonances with other authors of the nineteenth century. These moments of retroactive continuity take on a special significance in

Once history has been felt into fragments, each facet of the past appearing as an object of a specifically psychological interest, it becomes difficult to view history in any other way. Who knows what particular events will cause there to be more honest citizens with unpatched coats? But we can always learn more about what bits of history have meant for specific people. Even when people doubt that their experiences and choices have a decisive effect within history, a belief in the value of rearranging their relationship to history within their psyches persists. Eliot's novels make an active and extensive disclosure of what sacrifices are accepted when one attempts to persist in a commitment to collective reform while channeling one's judgments through the subjective experience

---

Jesse Rosenthal's book *Good Form*, a study of the relationship between Intuitionist ethics and novelistic form. When theorizing that link, Rosenthal turns from the Victorian Intuitionists who make the historical grounding of his argument to a surprising grouping of philosophers who share an investment in the idea of ethics as following rules that we have given to ourselves: Rawls, Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel, and late Foucault. "It is this tradition that allows us to address what I take to be the antinomy—the structuring paradox—of narrative theory: a sequence of events (or story, or *fabula*) comes logically prior to its telling (or discourse, or *sjuzhet*). The story is what gives the telling its coherence. But of course, rigorously speaking, the story, the *fabula* is *not there*: all we have is the telling" (32-3). For Rosenthal, the feeling of rightness when we feel that a telling is appropriate to a story that was only indicated by its telling is parallel to the feeling of rightness we find in holding life to an idea of the good that was derived from living in the first place. On one level, Rosenthal's argument accords with my sense that a particular form of ethical skepticism is produced by the reconstructive causal accounts of psychology and history that emerge during the eighteenth century, and that attempts to counteract or reverse ethical skepticism in the nineteenth century often work by attempting to rework the terms on which the determinative dynamics of psychology are speculatively reconstructed. On another level, his book is mostly concerned with texts where good form produces a validated feeling of the *sensus communis*, where realist narrative "works to bridge the space between the internal and the external, the individual and the social, by suggesting that there never really was a gap in the first place," while my project is focused on authors who did not mark a return to "a community of tacit consensus" (153). In this, my project has an affinity with a different work of criticism that describes a back-formed continuity. In *Empty Houses*, David Kurnick describes how certain authors repurpose their failures in the theater through their subsequent novelistic productions: essentially, these authors "'vocationalized' that failure" and "the novelistic texts most influenced by these theatrical failures are marked by a sense of incompleteness that becomes a meditation on the marginality of the aesthetic in modernity" (25). Beyond its significance for the self-understanding of the novelist, the effects of this "vocation of failure" imbues the novel-reader with an awareness of the communal space that the novel continually evokes but fails to produce, "rendering palpable to him the fact of his social apartness" (28). As we will see in later sections, Eliot's reader is continually reminded of an ideal of conscientious participation in collective history just as such a prospect is continually denied to the characters. Jesse Rosenthal, *Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2017). David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012).

of historical conditions, and of how representational strategies can manage the psychological burden of taking on those sacrifices.

### Sympathy and the Sociohistorical Imagination

For the last two decades, George Eliot's ethical thinking has been an important focal point for critics, especially insofar as it has been understood to reflect her commitment to registering immanent historical conditions. Her complex theorization and representation of sympathy has been understood to anticipate, and so exemplify, the kind of suspicion of transcendent value claims that has been so central to historicist literary criticism in our own time: Eliot's ethical thinking is socially and culturally embedded, embodied, and modeled on hermeneutical practices, as we have learned from Amanda Anderson's work on disinterestedness and cosmopolitanism in *Daniel Deronda* (2001), Catherine Gallagher's essay on the erotics of ethics in *Middlemarch* (2005), and Suzy Anger's work on Eliot's engagement with the tradition of Biblical hermeneutics (2005), respectively.<sup>3</sup> In recent criticism, Eliot's ethical thinking has at times become effectively

---

<sup>3</sup> I give special prominence to these works not only because they have proved generative for subsequent criticism, but also because they mark a shift towards a more sympathetic assessment of Eliot's ethical thinking. Anderson and Anger both thematize this shift as a process of reinterpreting moments of friction and disconnection among Eliot's characters, not as signs of suppressed problems in her ethical thinking, but rather as evidence of her efforts to engage the difficulties and compromises entailed in her position. Anderson says that "a reconstructive reading of Eliot's use of reflective dialogism has implications not only for critiques of her treatment of Jewish nationalism, but also for more general critiques of her ideals of intersubjective experience." Earlier critics had argued that "these ideals, already evasions of more complex social and political problems, simply do not hold, that the positive versions of intersubjective reciprocity or redemptive sympathy are radically undercut by a more primary egotism or inwardness, or by power, or by the indeterminacy of language itself." Anderson argues, on the contrary, that "Eliot's use of a more complex dialogical ideal to figure a wider politics casts into doubt [...] the idea that Eliot relinquishes a broader social perspective in favor of cozy intersubjectivity." Anger introduces her study of Eliot's "hermeneutics of sympathy" by echoing the narrator of *Middlemarch* to ask of the existing criticism, "—but why always misunderstanding and appropriation?" She challenges both the view of Eliot as a "proto-deconstructionist, proclaiming, or at least unwittingly demonstrating, indeterminacy" and the view of "sympathy in Eliot as always in fact a manifestation of self-interest [connected] with appropriation and even sadism or masochism." Though I will place a greater emphasis on unsettling power dynamics in my reading of *Daniel Deronda* than either of these critics does, I follow their lead in concluding that the

indistinguishable from historicist sophistication. David Russell (2018) argues that the *tact* of Eliot's novels—which he defines as an ethics of handling other people thoughtfully—is enabled by her uncompromising rejection of the “doctrine of Compensation” in her early nonfiction work, which he characterizes as a belief in transcendent rewards for good deeds. Sebastian Lecourt (2018), in his study of how religious inheritances came to be valued within an important strand of Victorian thought for their ability to “build up a liberal self by giving it a quality of aesthetic heterogeneity,” argues that sympathy for Eliot is ultimately about “many-sidedness,” meaning that it is “less a Smithian abstraction of ourselves into the other's point of view than a capacity to attend to as many features of human life as possible.”<sup>4</sup> Sympathy has never looked more historically sophisticated, and hence more compelling, than it does in Eliot criticism today. And yet, as I will be arguing, it is possible that Eliot's own historical sensibility has yet to receive the treatment it is due in relation to her conception of sympathy, a lack bound to limit the insights available into the intersection of her ethical imagination with her characteristic forms of representation.

My claim is not so much that Eliot's novels are attuned to the ways in which historical conditions shape morality, but that they are deeply concerned with the moral psychology of historicism itself. Eliot's account of sympathy within an immanent frame does offer many-sidedness, sophistication, the lineaments of gratified desire, but it also

---

shortcomings of sympathy in Eliot's novels are not eruptions of suppressed contradictions, but rather demonstrations of the complexity of her thinking. Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 136; Catherine Gallagher, “George Eliot: Immanent Victorian,” *Representations* 90 (2005), 61-74; Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005) 96; 97; 113.

<sup>4</sup> David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2018), 1-2; 100-7; Sebastian Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief: Victorian Anthropology, Liberal Aesthetics, and the Secular Imagination* (NYC: Oxford UP, 2018), 2; 109.

entails a willing subjection to the limitations of one's sociohistorical situation, the social relations and conventions in which a person is involved. In that way, her account of sympathy provides insight into the intersection of psychology and circumstance at which immanence is experienced. While Eliot's resistance to grounding historicism in transcendent claims has become one of the most consistently admired features of her thinking, her narrative voice routinely situates these representations of our immanence in history along with a simulation of a transcendent perspective, which imparts a consoling confidence upon a process that is ultimately defined by vulnerability. With her assertions about the sublime historical realities moving beyond her plots, Eliot continues to minister to the desire for transcendence even as she forecloses the possibility of its consummation, which suggests that there is a dimension to her moral psychology beyond what can be motivated and satisfied by sympathy alone—a countervailing drive to see oneself situated in impersonal history.

In the first half of this dissertation, we saw how Thomas Carlyle and Elizabeth Barrett Browning each theorize reflexive virtues in their attempts to bring individual psychology into an active relationship to its historical situation. Carlyle was motivated to theorize a reflexive virtue in order to overcome the complacency and dejection so often associated with historicist thinking by reinterpreting historical contingency as an individuating vocation. He attempted to solve this problem by making the sincere recognition of such a vocation his primary definition of the good life, which is both exemplified and instantiated through heroism and hero-worship. Barrett Browning was motivated to theorize a reflexive virtue in order to imagine an active relationship to the

present through a remediation of one's feelings of intimacy and estrangement both relative to other people and relative to oneself.

For both authors, the development of reflexive virtue requires that people supplement the affinities that they experience in the conduct of ordinary life with imaginative affinities in order to cultivate a particular disposition for recognizing the ethical prospects specific to their situation. Barrett Browning's view of history lacked the radical disjunctions and demands that led Carlyle to see different historical moments and different positions in society as isolated by their incommensurability, but she adds greater complexity to the process of finding an active relationship between individual psychology and historical situation by developing the ways in which psychology is a product of a personal history, precisely to the extent that it shows the influence of affinities with particular people. If psychology is to bend to the demands of a historical situation, it must do so against the strain of personal history, which is always already shaped by a range of existing affinities, heroic and otherwise.

George Eliot inherits the difficulties of her intellectual forebearers.<sup>5</sup> Like Carlyle, her historical long view leads her to contend with the ways in which the ethical and

---

<sup>5</sup> Eliot's public and private writings give several expressions of her investment in the work of both authors, and a particular attention to the elements of their oeuvres referenced here. Eliot recommends *Sartor Resartus* in her letters; in *Adam Bede*, when the narrator is entreating the reader not to judge "Old Leisure" from the turn of the nineteenth century by modern standards, she concludes a list of the definitive changes by noting that no one had read *Sartor Resartus* yet (560). In a review essay, from 1855, of a book of excerpts from Carlyle, she gives the highest estimate to his influence: if his books were all burned, "it would be only like cutting down an oak after its acorns have sown a forest. For there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived" (344). It is noteworthy that though the book under review collects excerpts from his earliest work through his writings of the fifties, Eliot chooses to give excerpts from *Past and Present* and *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, in addition to mentioning *Sartor* and *The French Revolution* favorably and *Latter Day Pamphlets* negatively in her remarks, suggesting where her investments in his work lie (346-8; 344-5). Eliot's letters convey a persistent attention to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work, and particular praise for *Aurora Leigh*. Her review of it says that "no poem embraces so wide a range of thought and emotion, or takes such a complete possession of our nature," and praises it for having the sort of "*ample being*" that a

political significance of a given action depends on its place in history and a larger social order. Like Barrett Browning, she wants to modify sympathy by using imaginative affinities to form a complex, multifaceted relationship to the present.

Eliot responds to the joint pressure of these problems in her early review essay “The Natural History of German Life,” in which history is continually displaced by what we might call the sociohistorical: not only because it asserts that our social relations are the product of historical processes, but also because it incessantly satirizes and undermines those mechanisms by which people claim to gain a commanding knowledge of their relation to history beyond the partialities developed within those various social relations.<sup>6</sup>

The works under review are Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl’s studies of the German people, which Eliot draws upon to emphasize both the uneven development of society in Europe—to understand the German peasantry, she recommends that her reader recall what English peasants were like fifty years earlier (113)—and the ways in which the uneven and diverging developments of different populations in Europe amount to an

---

person has. In particular, she emphasizes the impression that the poem gives of a psyche extended in time: “its poetical *body*—is everywhere informed by a *soul*, namely, by genuine thought and feeling. [...] This mind has its far-stretching thoughts, its abundant treasure of well-digested learning, its acute observation of life, its yearning sympathy with multiform human sorrow, its store of personal domestic love and joy” (407-8). In her letters, we learn that her and George Henry Lewis read *Aurora Leigh* aloud three times. We also learn that she read *Casa Guidi Windows* during her preparation for writing *Romola*, of which she said, “it contains [...] a very noble expression of what I believe to be the true relation of the religious mind to the Past.” George Eliot to Martha Jackson, Foleshill, 16 December 1841, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1954), vol I, 122. George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (NYC: Penguin, 2008). George Eliot, “Thomas Carlyle,” *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (NYC: Penguin, 1990), 343-8. George Eliot, “[From *Westminster Review* (January 1857)],” *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (NYC: Norton, 1996), 407-8. George Eliot to Sara Sophia Hennell, Gorey, 5 June 1857, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1954), vol II, 342. George Eliot Journal, London 17-19 February 1862, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1954), vol IV, 15.

<sup>6</sup> George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt & Nicholas Warren (NYC: Penguin, 1990), 107-39. All subsequent citations to this essay will be parenthetical by page number.

“incarnate history,” which she calls the “fundamental idea of Riehl’s books” (129). Taken together, these ideas mean that the many populations that coexist in Europe are not synchronized in a singular historical process, even though they are coparticipants in some processes. She derives two interconnected problems from these premises. The first problem is that people’s behavior only makes sense when understood from within their incarnate histories. Eliot remarks about the peasant that “*Custom with him holds the place of sentiment, of theory, and in many cases, of affection*” (119, her emphasis). History creates the condition for their social relations. Yet it is difficult to successfully learn about the incarnate history of another part of society because of a second problem, namely that everyone’s knowledge depends on the history of associations that is incarnate in their language. She says that “the language of cultivated nations is in anything but a rational state,” with misunderstandings between “the great sections” inevitable; “the subtle shades of meaning, and still subtler echoes of association make language an instrument which scarcely anything short of genius can wield with definiteness and certainty” (128). She rejects the possibility of pursuing a totally rationalized language, arguing that “The nature of European men has its roots intertwined with the past, and can only be developed by allowing those roots to remain undisturbed while the process of development is going on until that perfect ripeness of the seed which carries with it a life independent of the root” (128-9). Participation in historical processes “can only be developed” by acceding to those customs that have conditioned one’s perspective and those social relations that define the field of possible reforms.

To contend with the historically determined partialities of any given perspective, the essay appeals to the imaginative extension of the sympathies by art as a process that

can help us more effectively understand how different people live out the influence of complex historical processes. Yet the essay's arguments imply a reflexive role for sympathy: it would not be enough to merely *expand* our sympathies; instead, the essay suggests that a person needs to balance the perspectives formed by multiple sympathies in order to recognize the ethical prospects of their particular sociohistorical situation.

The essay begins and ends by remarking on the difficulties of imagining the world on scales beyond immediate experience, but what starts as a problem of epistemology for individual minds is recast in terms of the limited perspectives afforded by various social roles with their accumulated histories of experience and custom. The opening paragraph imagines two men thinking of the word "railways," one relying on a few images, like his local station or an "indefinite length of tram-road," while the other has experiences with railways in a succession of different roles (as "a 'navvy,' an engineer, a traveler, a railway director and shareholder, and a landed proprietor in treaty with a railway company"). Both can competently use the word, but the second man has a more credible claim to use it with a command of "all the essential facts in the existence and relations of the *thing*" (107). Between her two men saying "railways," it's possible that the first one *does* have a clear and distinct impression when he reduces the railways to a few of his experiences; what makes the second man more credible isn't that he has clearer impressions, nor is it that he has more of them, but rather that he's experienced the railways in a variety of different roles, each gathering together different modes of experience. The lesson of this philosophical exercise, then, is that we need to combine multiple relations in order to adequately understand something, but the difficulties of applying that lesson are heightened in the remainder of the essay. The standard of

comprehensive knowledge becomes even more daunting when one attempts to understand the terms that she introduces next: “‘the people,’ ‘the masses,’ ‘the proletariat,’ ‘the peasantry’” (108). We have shifted from knowledge of objects to the knowledge that people can have of other people, and, as a result, the epistemological difficulties that Eliot has used to frame the essay are compounded. To belong to one of these groups is not only to accumulate experience in a certain mode, but to participate in the ongoing history of certain social relations and customs. To complicate matters, such terms partially overlap each other, especially as the essay expands to consider group-nouns that refer to regions, nations, “European society,” and people in general. If it’s exhausting to even imagine accumulating all of the kinds of experience necessary to understand the railways, then this turn to the social implies that it’s even more sublimely impossible to conceive of the totality of human relations with their separate but overlapping histories, with their varying conventions and partialities.

Though sympathy is introduced to the essay with a celebration of its power to motivate people to considerations beyond themselves, it quickly becomes evident that Eliot is interested in the ways in which sympathy can be patterned into a disposition that shapes the way a person relates to perspectives beyond their own. The essay makes an early appeal to the power of art to imaginatively extend and adapt a person’s sympathies:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is a part of themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. (110)

There is a profound motivating power in the event of feeling sympathy with someone, and a great artist can induce that condition by manipulating the feelings that form “the

raw material of moral sentiment.” If one can induce sympathy, then it opens up the possibility that sympathy is not only a series of instances of shared sentiment, but a disposition subject to a pattern of habituation. Eliot not only believes that sympathy can be cultivated into patterns, but also that some of those patterns have perverse and vitiating effects on the way that people engage with the world. It is for this reason that an artist who tries to depict “the People” has a “sacred” task: “it *is* serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humor in the life of our more heavily laden fellow-men, should be perverted and turned toward a false object instead of the true one” (110-1). Surveying the tendencies of contemporary reformers, she finds them persisting in futile and counterproductive plans for lack of a thorough and intricate sympathy with the motives and perspectives of the people (111-2) or relying on knowledge of “a single fragment of society” as “the basis of a theory which quietly substitutes for the small group of Parisian proletaires or English factory-workers the society of all Europe – nay, of the whole world” (129). Because the essay is framed by an aspiration not only to extend knowledge, but also to interconnect and balance knowledge of multiple perspectives, it is invested in sympathy as something more than an instance of moral sentiment but also as a disposition that can work on multiple scales and in multiple relations.

If sympathy is to take on a privileged role in comprehending humanity on multiple scales and in multiple relations, sympathy itself will have to become complex and reflexive. Eliot’s conception of sympathy can be understood in opposition to her understanding of *philistinism*, a term to which she gives a modified definition at the essay’s end. According to Riehl, a philistine is one who “has no sympathy with political

and social events except as they affect his own comfort and prosperity.” Eliot risks seeming “presumptuous” by providing her own interpretation of the German usage of the term. For her, philistinism is the spirit that “judges everything from a lower point of view than the subject demands; which judges the affairs of the parish from the egoistic or purely personal point of view; which judges the affairs of the nation from the parochial point of view, and does not hesitate to measure the merits of the universe from the human point of view” (137). This definition is striking, coming at the end of an essay that spends so much time defending the value of a serious consideration of local customs against the tendency to impose universal norms: on the one hand, it is an acknowledgement that the local perspective can be stultifying and complacent, but it also implies that some questions really can be left as “affairs of the parish.” Riehl’s definition of the philistine only moves along one axis: a philistine’s sympathies are too narrow, and one can transcend philistinism by widening one’s sympathies. For Eliot, one needs to be able to adapt one’s sympathies to the appropriate scale. What does it mean to find the right scale, to judge the affairs of the parish from a different point of view than the affairs of the universe? We can refer back to the essay’s opening problem, the question of how one forms the right associations to truly comprehend terms like “railways” or “the people.” The answer was: by experiencing them in a succession of different roles. When we consider the philistine’s failure to consider things on the right scale, we can recognize that he doesn’t lack for associations, and he might not even lack for sympathies, but nonetheless reverts to the associations and sympathies that are personally gratifying or familiar, even when he is ostensibly attempting to take a broad view. For Eliot, there is this commonality between people who generalize about “the people,” whether on the

model of idealized opera-peasants, statistics, or an overextension of a case study of Parisian proletaires: any attempt to jump to the broadest scale fails to recognize how different groups of people are themselves shaped by their own partialities and customs. The fact that people tend to revert to the associations that touch them personally, which is what Riehl refers to in his definition, is a comparatively simple problem. What about the philistine who gives invidious priority to his parochial sympathies when he “judges the affairs of the nation,” or who has passionate sympathies “turned towards a false object?” It is the persistent project of Eliot’s ethics to help us recognize the challenge of balancing a variety of affinities and commitments when we do transcend narrow egoism through sympathy.

In “The Natural History of German Life,” sympathy operates in two registers: sympathy as an instance of shared sentiment, and sympathy as a disposition that can be cultivated. The sort of person who is addressed by this essay isn’t finally told how they should understand their ethical prospects in terms of a role in collective history; instead, they are left with the sociohistorical, their participation in social relations that already manifest certain historical conditions. Eliot doesn’t designate a separate name for this disposition of sympathy properly directed, by virtue of a recognition of one’s sociohistorical situation, but I will call it sympathy as a reflexive virtue.

So philistinism is a problem of scale, and sympathy as a reflexive virtue corrects for it, but the problem of scale that philistinism presents us with, on Eliot’s definition, is a particularly complex one that can’t simply be solved by more or wider sympathy. To characterize something as a problem of scale tends to turn it into a problem of knowledge, of experiencing or imagining sizes dramatically different than the ones on

which we operate.<sup>7</sup> But what we call problems of scale are just as often problems of identification, of deciding which collectives we think of ourselves as members of, what wholes we're a part of.<sup>8</sup> As the examples in "The Natural History" suggest, and as the plots of Eliot's novels show, many of the most difficult and emotionally devastating tests of the ethical value of sympathy are those where multiple sympathies seem to place incompatible demands on a person while unfolding at different scales, affecting different aspects of a person's life. The problems of scale that sympathy faces don't merely create the risk that a person's feelings will be too weak or too narrow to adequately sympathize; rather, they create the possibility that a person's sympathies, themselves, can distort and narrow his or her relationship to the world if those sympathies aren't developed into an active balance with a range of other sympathies.

---

<sup>7</sup> For an essay that treats problems of scale in this sense, see "Large-Scale Sympathy and Simultaneity in George Eliot's *Romola*" by Jacob Jewusiak, which posits that the central challenge of sympathizing with a group of people is to turn what is typically a diachronic sequence (sympathy with a series of individuals) into a synchronic instance of simultaneously sympathizing with them in a collective. In this framework, sympathizing with large-scale collectives requires one to detach oneself from one's more local sympathies, so he argues that such "large-scale sympathy" tends to be fragile, because "such detachment has the tendency to disable the crosscurrents of affect that make sympathy an ethical act." I differ with his analysis in two important ways. First, I draw a different understanding of the relationship between sympathy and collectivity than Jewusiak does from "The Natural History." Following Eliot's parallel between the example of knowledge about railways and knowledge about "the people," "the masses," "the proletariat," "the peasantry," I argue that Eliot's investment in sympathy in "The Natural History" emphasizes its power to progressively situate a person in an ethical understanding of their relations to other people. After describing how a person could achieve a greater understanding of the term "railways" by taking a series of different roles that relate to different aspects of the railway, Eliot describes how the sympathy generated by realist art could inform the attitudes of reformers or politicians: the implication is that it can gradually improve their behavior without requiring them to be in a state of "crosscurrents of affect" every time they act. Second, I emphasize sympathy's function as a disposition, because I want to draw out the role of habituation in Eliot, as well as the limiting effects of cumulative experience. Jewusiak emphasizes the difficulties of achieving and maintaining the synchronic synthesis of "large-scale sympathy," but he still treats it as an isolated moment, where I argue that the reflexivity cultivated by sympathy comes with irreversible consequences for the person who develops it by cumulatively developing them through certain relations and not others. Jacob Jewusiak, "Large-Scale Sympathy and Simultaneity in George Eliot's *Romola*," *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, (54:4) 2014, 854; 860-2.

<sup>8</sup> I owe this idea to conversations with Maxwell Sater and with Nathan Pippenger.

### Sympathy as a Reflexive Virtue in *Romola*

Sympathy has continued to anchor recent discussions of Eliot's ethical thinking, while there has been a recognition that it is necessary to situate it within a broader understanding of the dynamics that guide a person's moral psychology, including hermeneutics, imagining other minds, embodiment, and the erotic. Rather than viewing sympathy as an ideal state to obtain to and persist in, there has been a tendency to conceive of it as a process that plays out amid the complexities of life, with a range of possible effects.<sup>9</sup> If the tendency has been to give thicker, more complex descriptions of the interaction between sympathy and circumstance, then virtue can provide a useful framework for synthesizing these perspectives, because its account of moral psychology gives attention to the role of routines and relationships in developing one's dispositions and in managing the relationship between abstract ideas and practice.

Sympathy as a reflexive virtue is the disposition by which Eliot's characters make their complex negotiations with conventionality by balancing their various affinities. To the extent that a person can use an imaginative extension of their sympathies in order to

---

<sup>9</sup> Suzy Anger makes this an explicit goal of her chapter on Eliot, for example, arguing that Eliot understood there to be a complex relationship between sympathy as a form of knowledge and sympathy as benevolence. Rae Greiner argues that Eliot calls into question the symbiosis in earlier Victorian novels between sympathy and omniscient narration, ultimately concluding that "only a sympathy that maintains a separation between self and other enables ethical choice, the ability to decide which sentiments to endorse and which to let die or resurrect." For the role of hermeneutics, see Anger. For considerations of the process of imagining other minds and its complex role in Eliot's ethical thinking, see Greiner and Jewusiak, as well as Andrew Miller and Adela Pinch. For the role of embodiment and the erotic in Eliot's ethical thinking, see Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," discussed below. For a reading of embodiment in Eliot as an index of the influence of Feuerbach on her thinking about sympathy, see Christina Richieri Griffin's essay on Eliot and Ludwig Feuerbach. Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation in Nineteenth Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2012); Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 72; Adela Pinch, *Thinking about Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (NYC: Cambridge UP, 2010) 5-14; 164; 162-7; 14-9; 168; Catherine Gallagher, *Representations* 90.1 (2005), 61-74; Christina Richieri Griffin "George Eliot's Feuerbach: Senses, Sympathy, Omniscience, and Secularism," *ELH* 84.2 (Summer 2017): 475-502.

rethink their possibilities for living a good life relative to their circumstances, sympathy operates as both a reflexive virtue and a form of configuration. There are plenty of examples of characters in Eliot's novels rethinking their ethics upon recognizing their affinities with another person who pulls their sympathies beyond the routines and relationships that have formed their practical concerns—one thinks of Maggie Tulliver, rescued from despair by her feeling of affinity with Thomas à Kempis.<sup>10</sup> When we think over a list of characters for whom sympathy acts as a mode of configuration in Eliot, what's unsettling is that these phases of self-reflexive rethinking are almost all superseded by a return to some established role in their community and their historical moment—what's worse, some of the exceptions to this pattern are simply characters that die without making such a return, like Maggie Tulliver and Mordecai. For the most part, practical wisdom reasserts itself and people are left to live as well as they can within routines and relationships that would have been available to them before their sympathies transcended their immediate circumstances. So, while Eliot treats sympathy as a reflexive virtue, it sets the terms on which characters reengage with available routines and relationships, rather than enabling a clean break.

*Romola* is the first of Eliot's novels set in a place beyond rural England and a time beyond living memory, and the setting has important implications that lead her to take a more schematic and detached approach to representing the way in which sympathy can structure the relationship between individual psychology and history.<sup>11</sup> As such, it is the novel that gives the most explicitly documented account of how the process of balancing

---

<sup>10</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1999), 259-64.

<sup>11</sup> George Eliot, *Romola* (NYC: Penguin, 1980). All subsequent citations will be parenthetical by page number.

multiple sympathies can lead someone to a newly individuated recognition of the ethical demands of their sociohistorical situation. In the novel's "Proem," the narrator emphasizes both the person-to-person scale of public life in Florence, and its complex political, cultural, and economic interactions with foreign powers and foreign persons (46), as well as the way in which the conflicting traditions represented by Catholicism and Humanism vie with each other in the intimate lives of Florentines (47-8).<sup>12</sup> The reader is introduced to Renaissance Florence as a milieu in which personal sympathies lead on to impersonal entanglements and historical affinities. The contrast with *Adam Bede* is suggestive: the reason that Adam feels such a strong affinity for Arthur is because he lacks a larger world of imaginative affinities to cultivate: "he had no ideal world of

---

<sup>12</sup> These dichotomies between tradition and modernity and between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (that is, between familiar, bonding social formations and impersonal, transactional social formations), as well as the tension between city and country, have had a special significance for readings of Eliot informed by social theory, such as Franco Moretti's section on Eliot in *The Way of the World* and Raymond Williams' chapter on Eliot in *The Country and the City*, "Knowable Communities." *Romola*, like *Daniel Deronda*, brings her thinking into a different relationship to these categories than we find in her works of rural realism. *Romola* is not only her most urban novel, concerned almost exclusively with members of an early bourgeoisie, but it also stages conflicts between tradition and modernity that had been superseded for her readers by subsequent controversies to an extent that wasn't the case for her novels of the nineteenth century. The different social conditions of her novels have ramifications for their plots and their narration, but the ethical teaching is consistent, suggesting that Eliot was attentive to the various pressures exerted by different social formations, but felt that she was developing an ethics that was adaptable. For that matter, she was interested in the complex way in which these dichotomies interact with each other: rather than aligning them as three aspects of a single societal shift towards modernity, she found ways to consider the tensions among them, showing, for example, how the pressures of modernity penetrate rural life. Moretti, because he assumes that these three dichotomies align with each other (tradition-country-*Gemeinschaft* versus modernity-city-*Gesellschaft*) has trouble with Eliot: he expresses his wish that *Middlemarch* had been written about the city and not the country. While he can't match it to the pattern that he identifies in Continental *Bildungsroman*, which disclose the contradictions within modernity, he accepts *Middlemarch* as a book about the confrontation of modernity and tradition. Williams has a more subtle and sophisticated sense of the way in which Eliot works with these dichotomies, because he resists the assumption that they map on to each other. In his essay, he shows how the asymmetries among these three dichotomies are a shaping feature for Eliot's narratorial voice, which she sometimes bestows upon a character in a sort of narratorial embrace: the author, educated to the peak of modernity, attempts to depict a rural society that she is tied to by personal relationships—but that rural society itself is not simply a thick network of personal relationships stabilized by tradition; on the contrary, it moves under the continual influence of economic and political modernization and already depends on impersonal, transactional relationships. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1987), 220. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 170-1; 174.

dead heroes; he knew little of the life of men in the past; he must find the beings to whom he could cling with loving admiration among those who came within speech.”<sup>13</sup> In *Romola*, the central characters not only have access to a world of dead heroes but also understand many of the novel’s events in terms of their conflicting affinities for various traditions. By featuring Savonarola and events directly bearing on the fate of the Florence, while holding the narrative focus on Romola and Tito, the novel accentuates the shifting and indefinite network of personal affinities that interposes between a particular person and their experience of historical events. While the setting of the novel affords its characters a distinct self-awareness about the way in which their sympathies structure their relationship to history, it also lets the narrator present the workings of sympathy to the reader with an uncommon level of detachment, because it was the first of Eliot’s novels to focus on characters fundamentally remote from her readers. Her works of rural realism had acknowledged the historical particularity of their settings, but they concerned events that were always depicted as within the bounds of living memory—in *Adam Bede*, which has the earliest historical setting of any of her English novels, the narrator claims to have personally conversed with Adam (198)—and this connection to familiar experience is one of the reasons that their realism is said to aid the development of the sympathies: in the chapter of *Adam Bede* where the narrator defends realism, she specifically emphasizes its value for helping us understand the kind of ordinary, unheroic people that most of our neighbors are (197). Where her earlier fiction could claim to directly develop her readers’ sympathies for the kind of people who they might encounter in their ordinary lives, *Romola* engages her readers with people profoundly alien to them.

---

<sup>13</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (NYC: Penguin, 2008), 323. All subsequent citations will be parenthetical by page number.

The workings of sympathy remain central to the novel, but it is sympathy at a greater remove, which makes it more significantly a meditation on sympathy as such, than a direct inducement to it.

Taken together, these features of the novel's subject matter could have been the occasion for Eliot to make a happy synthesis between her ethical thinking and her analysis of history, to connect her belief in the ethical benefits of developing and balancing multiple sympathies to a narrative of historical agency represented in a community uniquely suited to depicting the political and social benefits of personal sympathies—which makes it all the more striking that there is no such happy synthesis in *Romola*. Instead, Romola's last reflexive realignment of her sympathies is made under the assumption that “the life of Florence was a web of inconsistencies” (652), and that she can maintain the sympathies that she had learned to cultivate through her sympathy with Savonarola only after giving up the hopes for social and political reform to which he had attached them. Where we might expect public history to supersede and incorporate the psychologies of the people who participates in it, what the representational techniques of *Romola* produce is a narrative in which the psychologies of the individual characters take precedence and incorporate a highly personalized and fragmented view of public history, which, even in this small, highly politicized community, only exists as memories and projections held up by tenuous symbols.

Like the “patched and plodding citizen” in “A Minor Prophet,” Romola watches a world-historical hero march by, while the novel makes her personal history subordinate collective history, taking her psyche and its sympathies as the privileged field of the

narrative.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, the novel also gives a great deal of attention to her husband Tito's sentiments over the course of the novel. Though he becomes a villain, he is exceptionally sensitive to other people's feelings and hates to cause anyone displeasure. Tito and Romola can help us mark the difference between sympathy as an instance of shared sentiment and sympathy as a reflexive virtue and a mode of configuration: it is because Tito's desire to please other people is so perfectly continuous with his desire to please himself that he winds up habitually subordinating his relations to other people into convenient self-deceptions, rather than recognizing himself as situated in a nexus of relations to other people. By the same token, the way in which Romola develops sympathy as a reflexive virtue will show how and why Eliot's conception of sympathy requires a compromising return to the existing routines and relationships of one's community.

The narrator of *Romola* puts forward two premises that clarify how sympathy can shape a person's relationship to their sociohistorical situation. Reflecting on the way in which a series of falsities have altered Tito's moral psychology, the narrator says that "our lives make a moral tradition for our individual selves, as the life of mankind at large makes a moral tradition for the race; and to have once acted nobly seems a reason why we should always be noble" (420). This claim draws on the old Aristotelian idea that our moral psychology is developed by repetition, but it also conceives of personal history on

---

<sup>14</sup> In taking up *Romola* as a paradigmatic example, I'm influenced by David Kurnick in his suggestion that the "coincidence of detachment and lassitude" in this most readerly novel is "suggestive for the task of thinking the ethical and political coordinates of reading itself. ... [T]he eroticism and passivity that have always been noted as elements of novel reading deserve recognition as themselves practices of detachment, submissions to the compulsions of modernity that precisely through that submission may be a mode of gaining a detached perspective on its exigencies." This formulation resonates with my argument that, when sympathy becomes reflexive in Eliot, it allows a person to recognize the sociohistorical conditions of their situation as though they were choosing them as a deliberate sacrifice. David Kurnick, "Abstraction and the Subject of Novel Reading: Drifting through *Romola*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (42:3) 2009, 495.

the model of human history: a history of noble actions isn't merely a source of habituation, but also contributes to a certain way of recognizing oneself and one's prospects. Crucially, a person's moral tradition isn't only formed by their actions; rather, it's also shaped by their sympathies. Earlier, while commenting on Tito's lingering aversion to "committing a secret offence against his wedded love," the narrator remarks that "every strong feeling makes to itself a conscience of its own – has its own piety; just as much as the feeling of the son towards the mother, which will sometimes survive amid the worst fumes of depravation" (370). "Feeling" here refers to a feeling for a person. Significantly, this multitude of consciences persists in a person beyond isolated moments of fellow-feeling in which two people share in a sentiment. The conception of personal moral history that emerges from these premises is not a closed interiority but a nexus of sympathies that positions a person in their sociohistorical situation.

What Tito and Romola demonstrate over the course of the novel, and what they each recognize in their own ways, is that to develop certain sympathies and not others is to take an irreversible course in the development of one's personal history *and* one's orientation towards history more broadly; it is because of this recognition of sympathy as a structuring influence on psychological formation that the limitations that many people have found in Eliot's depictions of sympathy are intrinsic to her conception of it as a process of balancing partialities as opposed to a state of impartiality.

In Tito, we have a useful supplement to the familiar idea that a failure to sympathize is narrowing, because Tito easily feels instances of sympathy, but doesn't let his sympathy lead him into a recognition of himself in terms of his relations to other people. When Tito has "his first real colloquy with himself" (149), deciding whether he

should attempt to rescue his adoptive father Baldassare from slavery, his decision to accept the hypothesis that Baldassare could be dead follows from his decision to prioritize his relationship to himself over and against his relationship to his adoptive father (150-1). Having begun to unmake his affinity for Baldassare, the news that Baldassare is alive and in bondage becomes an occasion to further isolate himself. He still would prefer that no one suffer, but he isn't convinced that he should suffer on someone else's behalf, and the history of his resistance to sympathy with Baldassare becomes its own self-reinforcing evidence that he must not have any reason to do so. Where Tito had acknowledged a youthful bond to Baldassare in his first colloquy with himself, he now casts aside the idea of suffering to save Baldassare by thinking, "To do so he must have loved Baldassare devotedly, and he did *not* love him" (168). When he eventually refuses Baldassare in person, dismissing him as a stranger and a madman, the narrator interprets this rejection as the inevitable result of the process by which he has habituated himself to a certain vision of his relations: it is "an inspiration of crime, that in one instant does the work of long premeditation" (284) and it demonstrates "that inexorable law of human souls, that we prepare ourselves for sudden deeds by the reiterated choice of good or evil which gradually determines character" (287). The choice of good or evil that is ultimately determinative is not that he has lied before, but that he has supported his lying by subordinating any past sympathy for Baldassare. As his plots progress, Tito tends to avoid any complications from his moments of sympathy by treating the feelings of other people as isolated instances within his personal history, so that even his sympathy for other people generates occasions to reassert the innocent primacy of his relationship with himself. The narrator notes that it is "a characteristic

fact” about Tito that it never occurs to him to rid himself of Baldassare through “direct measures” because “he would still have been glad not to give pain to any mortal. He had simply chosen to make life easy to himself” (288). This tendency to absorb and subordinate his sympathy for other people through his feeling for himself is encapsulated in a moment when his relationship with Romola begins to sour, and he laments the friction because “she was the wife of his first love” (345). In Tito, we have a subtle illustration of way in which instances of sympathy are perfectly compatible with a narrow egoism.

Yet Romola’s more generous and active sympathies also act as a limiting condition of her development. Initially, her sympathies are limiting because she cannot derive any personal vocation from the relationships that she finds herself in. She enters into her relationship with Tito under the assumption that her love for him will be a continuation of her intense bond to her father and the end of her loneliness, as if she could simply redouble an existing sympathy to fill a gap in her life without expanding or distorting the shape of her commitments (239). She realizes soon enough that she can’t expect Tito to share her nearly boundless sympathy for her father and the superhuman patience it educes (308)—and Tito reinforces the lesson by selling her father’s library without consulting her—but her problem could be described as an inability to find a set of sympathies that will allow her to recognize herself as having any sense of personal vocation. Once their marriage begins to sour, Romola is conscious that what she finds disappointing in Tito is his unwillingness to balance multiple sympathies: upon hearing his pretentious argument for abandoning any lingering commitments to her father or godfather, she “recoiled from this hopelessly shallow readiness which professed to

appropriate the widest sympathies and had no pulse for the nearest” (354). Yet, once her affinity for Tito has become tainted, she finds herself with a devastating lack of sympathies around which to form a sense of purpose. Seizing a hold of the strongest affinity that she has left, her affinity with her dead father, she accentuates the feeling of alienating betrayal: she dwells on the library’s removal “because this vivifying of pain and despair about her father’s memory was the strongest life left to the affections” (386). Romola dwells on the indignity of her father suffering this additional abandonment and betrayal after his death by the actions of his son-in-law Tito, and this occasions her self-estrangement from Florence: social death becomes a way of enacting her sympathy with her late father.

Her encounter with Savonarola during her first attempted flight from Florence has the unintended effect of expanding the way in which she relates to her sympathies, initiating the development of a reflexive sympathy that allows her to more actively conceive of her relations to the wider world.

Crucially, the fact that Romola can only realize her affinities for Savonarola through an imaginative relationship and at a distance allows a measure of independence to her development. After her conversation with Savonarola, she is assigned the sincere but mediocre Fra Salvestro as her personal confessor (438-9), which ensures that the relationship that really matters to her will be conducted indirectly in the same imaginative mode as her relationship to the lingering sympathies that persist from her personal history (e.g., with her dead father and with her memory of what she thought Tito would be). Romola’s relationship to Savonarola is a paradigmatic example of what configuration by an imaginative sympathy can do for a character in Eliot: a discussion of “her strong

affinity for his passionate sympathy and the splendor of his aims” (464) occasions the narrator’s remark that “no soul is desolate as long as there is a human being for whom it can feel trust and reverence” (465). Savonarola’s influence enables Romola to recognize new forms of affinity. Her idea of Savonarola leads her to derive significance from the sympathies that she briefly experiences and then disengages in the course of the care work that she does on behalf of the church, allowing her to imagine the connection between daily acts of “pity” and larger ends (522-3), and this helps to sustain her through the isolation she experiences in her marriage to Tito.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that Romola’s sympathies are increasingly disconnected from direct, ongoing relationships with other people leads her to reinterpret the other lingering affinities from her personal history at the same imaginative remove as her relationship to Savonarola. In Book Three, her feelings of affinity for Savonarola, Tito, and her godfather become competing parts of an unstable balance. What causes Romola to develop sympathy into a reflexive virtue is not merely her increasing ability to derive a sense of personal vocation from sympathy with strangers, but rather the way in which her affinities for people with incompatible ambitions and commitments forces her to balance incommensurate affinities. Thus, her disappointment with the “narrowness” of Savonarola is followed by the recognition that “her affection and respect were clinging with new tenacity to her godfather, and with him to those memories of her father” who

---

<sup>15</sup> The care work that she does on behalf of Savonarola’s ministry allows her to give herself a “firm footing” in “womanly sympathy” (463) *at will*. This is notable, because it is in the wake of heroically caring for the people of a village ravished by plague that she ultimately recognizes that she can form a sense of personal vocation and maintain bonds of sympathy without having faith in the goodness or worthiness of civic life that Savonarola had urged upon her at their first meeting (650-3). The narrator is explicit that sympathy with pain is narrowing (502), and Romola seems to have totally left care work behind at the novel’s end, except as a sort of step-mother to Tessa’s son Lillo (674-5), but the combined urgency and impersonality of care work evidently helps her to experience the power of sympathy to form a sense of vocation independently of the entanglements of any particular relationship.

had opposed the invidious religiosity that Savonarola has become associated with in her mind (526-7). By a similar rebalancing, when she “required a strength that neutrality could not give” her affinity for Savonarola is reactivated. That renewed prominence in her sympathies is explained by the way that his excommunication “simplified and ennobled the resistant position of Savonarola by bringing into prominence its wider relations.” Where her sympathies had retreated from the idea of Savonarola as a compromised but harsh accuser, they reemerge when he can be seen as a man of wide and brave sympathies in his own right, because “Life never seems so clear and easy as when the heart is beating faster at the sight of some generous and self-risking deed” (541). In a revealing non-sequitur, the narrator passes from this account of Romola’s newfound strength to a description of how she has consciously withdrawn from Tito: “She had ventured no new words to Tito that would apprise him of her late interview with Baldassarre, and the revelation he had made to her,” because such an “agitating, difficult” conversation would win her nothing but “cool sarcasm about her sympathy with his assassin” (541). Not only do her sympathies with these men involve her in judging among rival commitments, but they’re also shaped by her understanding of what their own sympathies are and how they inform those commitments. Thus, in one instance, her sense of Savonarola’s failure to sympathize leads her to give renewed prominence to her sympathy for her godfather, who had been in sympathy with her father, who had resisted the kind of narrow and exclusionary attitude that troubles her about Savonarola; and in another instance her sense of Tito’s callousness and of Savonarola’s willingness to suffer exclusion throws into focus the ways in which his project does represent a deep sympathy for the spiritual community with which he identifies. In these relations, sympathies lead

on to sympathies, and the process of developing and balancing affinities at different scales and in different relations becomes a decisive means of configuring an active relationship between one's psychology and one's sociohistorical situation.

What Tito and Romola both struggle with is the way in which developing or resisting their sympathies with other people makes irreversible shifts in their personal histories. And because the significance of one's sympathies for other people is reshaped by one's understanding of their sympathies, the capacity of sympathies to remake psychology is compounded: Romola is not only reshaped by her sympathy with Tito, but the effect of that sympathy on her is different when she believes that he sympathizes with the wishes of her father than when she thinks that he doesn't. Tito can take control of this dynamic, because he has a simple understanding of what he wants to extract from his relationships with other people: shortly after the narrator comments that every feeling for another person makes its own conscience, Tito recognizes that his pleasure in Tessa depends on her *not* forming new relationships (371), making her into a sort of emotional cul-de-sac. Romola, because she feels more personal stakes in her relationships, because she is willing to discover new implications for herself in her sympathies for other people, has to develop a capacity to reflexively balance those affinities.

Romola's sympathy becomes a reflexive virtue, a disposition that helps her recognize herself as having an individuating relationship to her sociohistorical situation. What Romola achieves in the course of the novel is the ability to disarticulate the perspectives that she gains from her sympathies with other people from the opinions and actions of those people. Thus, she can recognize an affinity between herself and Savonarola, but use it as the basis for seeking an active separation from Tito, where

Savonarola had urged her to persist in her relationship to him: “The law was sacred. Yes, but the rebellion might be sacred too. It flashed upon her mind that the problem before her was essentially the same as that which had lain before Savonarola” (552-3). Where Savonarola had justified his rebellion in terms of a role in the larger history of the republic, Romola has taken the example of that rebellion as an occasion to reinterpret her own social bonds as subject to the same sorts of contingencies and crises that she has seen in her dealings with public life. The resolve that she gathers from this specifically prepares her against the possibility that Tito could use “all the cherished memories of her father” to humiliate her with the suggestion of joining a convent to avoid scandal, which would call up the avenue by which her brother abandoned the family (553). In their first conversation, Savonarola argues for the interconnection of civic and personal responsibility in a religious frame, and asserts the imperative of persisting in her marriage to Tito. Because her relationship to these ideas is routed through her complex and evolving sympathy for Savonarola, which are inflected by her rival sympathies for her father and others, she can displace Savonarola’s insistence that she endure her marriage with a prospect derived from his example: that it may be morally appropriate to defy public norms in the interest of a different but nonetheless rigorous standard, still developed with reference to existing social bonds. Not only have her sympathies allowed her to form the prospect of actively separating herself from her husband as a morally justified course of action, but they have also allowed her to anticipate the ways in which she will be vulnerable to manipulation and discouragement through his potential invocation of her sympathies. Romola’s development of sympathy as a reflexive virtue is

a significant improvement in her prospects for living a good life, even as it leaves her decidedly limited by the social roles available to her in Florence and environs.

The sociohistorical structure of sympathy becomes an inexhaustible and untranscendable horizon in Eliot's ethics. Indeed, while Romola would inevitably be limited by the fact that she is a woman in Renaissance Florence, her reflexive sympathy has a way of preemptively absorbing those limitations as the field in which she acts—what could have been a passive condition is chosen as a deliberate sacrifice. To develop certain sympathies rather than others not only represents a choice among incommensurate options, but also leads to an irreversible change in the person developing the sympathies. It's in this sense that Eliot's psychological and historical sophistication leave her ethical teaching exhaustively focused on interpersonal relationships, not primarily because other minds are unfathomable, but because our development of different affinities represent cumulative developments in our personal history, individuating us into an increasingly idiosyncratic set of relations.<sup>16</sup> Because, for Eliot, one's sense of self is dependent on those various affinities, she doesn't valorize a self-isolating defiance of the social order in

---

<sup>16</sup> My emphasis on sympathy as a reflexive balancing of multiple relations is the reason that my account of the relationship between knowledge of other people and ethics in Eliot departs from Andrew Miller's. Miller's *Burdens of Perfection* focuses on the structuring effects of the second-person relationship, as such, in which the prospect of knowing another person is superseded by the challenge of acknowledging that person, and thus an epistemological problem is converted into a social relationship. This approach has been formative for me, but I place a greater emphasis on the diverging ways in which different authors conceptualized the ethical value of attending to exemplary individuals. In Eliot, in particular, the difference between an imaginative second-person relationship (attending to an exemplary person as though one were directly engaging with them) and a third-person relationship can be difficult to define, especially when shifting sympathies put different influences into prominence in a person's thought, as we have seen in *Romola*. His treatment of *Daniel Deronda* primarily focuses on thematizing the shift from thinking about morality in the generalized third-person (i.e., thinking about what "anybody" might judge) to the cultivation of second-person relationships that provide a more personally motivating, vocational set of moral urgencies, though it also acknowledges some of the problematic susceptibilities that come with such appeals to virtuous models, which will be central to my account of that novel. *Burdens of Perfection*. Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008). xii, 72-4.

the way that Carlyle sometimes does. In Eliot's novels, a character's self-aware sympathies with other people remain the inexhaustible source of narrative interest, rather than their relationship to the large historical processes that so interest the narrator.

From one point of view, Eliot's conception of sympathy is the most complexly described form of reflexivity that we have encountered in this dissertation, because it entails imagining oneself through multiple kinds of relationship without having to deny or resist any of them as systematically as the other approaches require. Sympathy doesn't require a simplifying sincerity of purpose, like Carlyle's heroism, because it allows for people to have diverging affinities and motivations in their psyche, and it also doesn't require being divided against oneself like Barrett Browning's double vision does. Instead, Eliot imagines sympathy as a process of developing and balancing multiple partialities. But in practice, a character often does have to deny some aspect of themselves, insofar as they have to underdevelop it when they take one of the available roles in their social world. So, from another point of view, it could seem to be a failed reflexivity, an interlude between two capitulations to conventionality.

### Omniscience and Tragedy

Thus far, I have argued that Eliot's ideal of sympathy is a reflexive virtue that situates a person in relation to the multiple, incommensurate possibilities of their sociohistorical situation, and that this framework makes Eliot's ethics operate at the level of the interpersonal, allowing characters to substantially renegotiate their relationship to the available possibilities of their social world, but never countenancing a fundamental break from that social order. This ideal of sympathy as reflexivity is the form in which

Eliot makes psychology incorporate history—psychology is shaped by historical conditions, but historical conditions are realized in the novels primarily through their psychological effects.

While Eliot's plots tend to emphasize the immediate conditions and the personal partialities that influence her characters, she derives two representational strategies from the affordances of omniscient narration that keep her characters situated in relation to history beyond the interpersonal scale to which their experiences are confined. One is a psychologized form of typology, which I will discuss at length in the second half of this chapter. The other more directly reflects the way in which sympathy functions in Eliot as a sacrifice to one's sociohistorical situation. It is her idiosyncratic conception of tragedy, which she defines in an essay on *Antigone*, as an unresolvable conflict between valid principles. Eliot uses her interpretation of *Antigone* as a model for reframing a wide range of historical conflicts in terms of the tension that they reveal when understood in this way. Tragedy thus becomes a way of finding, in even the most impersonal historical processes, the intensity of the strain between psychological states that are mutually comprehensible but opposed. Eliot's incorporation of such a conception of tragedy into her novels, I will argue, serves to afford both historical significance and heroic dignity to the inherently limiting process of choosing certain affinities over others

What tragedy and typology have in common is not a reliance on omniscient narration, but rather the creation of a narrative approximation of omniscience through the retrospect of a multigenerational perspective. Both typology and tragedy are appealed to by *characters* in Eliot's novels as a way to impart a simulation of retrospective certainty onto their lives. The appeal to retrospection, the narration of the present as though it were

the past, allows Eliot's novels to represent the limitations that are acceded to by individuals as though they were deliberate sacrifices, chosen for their meaning within a collective history that none of her characters are able to directly experience.

In Eliot's novels, tragedy provides a model for reading human affairs as a series of noble sacrifices by finding conflicts between valid principles in the impersonal processes of history. Eliot's novels do not follow traditional rules of tragedy, but they are nonetheless shaped by her thinking on tragedy.<sup>17</sup> Eliot's essay on *Antigone* argues that its tragedy turns on the antagonism between valid claims, but adds that this mode of tragedy is reenacted throughout life:

Reformers, martyrs, revolutionists, are never fighting against evil only; they are placing themselves in opposition to a good – to a valid principle which cannot be infringed without harm. Resist the payment of ship-money, you bring on civil war; preach against false doctrines, you disturb feeble minds and send them adrift on a sea of doubt; make a new road, and you annihilate vested interests; cultivate a new region of the earth, and you exterminate a race of men. Wherever the strength of a man's intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, *there* is renewed the conflict between Antigone and Creon; such a man must not only dare to be right, he must also dare to be wrong.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Hardy characterizes Eliot as a tragic author, but that emphasis is inseparable from her drive to establish the deliberate artistry with which Eliot's novels are constructed. Hardy is writing in response to a critical underestimation of Eliot in the wake of High Modernism, which had tended to secure its aesthetic legitimacy with reference to premodern modes like tragedy and epic over and against the aesthetic traditions of the nineteenth century. Rather than attempting to place Eliot in the history of tragedy as a heavily theorized genre, Hardy quotes from Eliot's letters to establish that Eliot thought of tragedy as a central effect within her project: "she described herself as urging 'the human sanctities through tragedy—through pity and terror as well as admiration and delights' (Haight, iv, p. 301)." Interestingly, Hardy references D. W. Griffith to explain some of Eliot's effects, so her attempt to capture the deliberate artistry of Eliot's novels as a high art form nonetheless reminds us of Eliot's borrowings from the tradition of melodrama. Indeed, Eliot's tendency to draw on such a range of representational protocols means that her investment in tragedy as a mode or an interpretive frame cannot be easily mapped onto conventional definitions of tragedy as a genre with highly theorized formal features. Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (London: The Athlone Press, 1959), 5; 1; 85; 22.

<sup>18</sup> George Eliot, "The *Antigone* and its Moral," *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt & Nicholas Warren (NYC: Penguin, 1990), 365-6.

The terms on which Eliot defines tragedy follow her tendency to make psychology contain and incorporate history, even as it is altered with it. Every historical conflict can be recast not only as a disagreement, but as a psychological divergence, a situation in which “the strength of a man’s intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned”—that is, the validity of the rival principles is defined in terms of its power to compel a person’s psyche through intellect or moral sense or affection. Yet the emergence of a new prospect only reconfirms that the position which it would supersede remains valid for those who persist in it, so integrated to their psyche that it “cannot be infringed without harm.” Eliot’s definition of Antigone tragedy shifts the referent of that term from a particular drama of action and recognition to a condition of collective history itself, something so pervasive that it can never be fully recognized. Looking at her list of examples, one could easily question whether each of these conflicts is most aptly described as a conflict between rival principles that are consciously held by people on each side—but, then, one feature of Eliot’s extension of tragedy into human history is to seize upon psychological differences where one could more easily find a morass of impersonal forces. This lends some of the heroism of tragedy to banal and protracted processes—though it deprives tragedy of that uniquely punctual kind of fellow-feeling that we find in catharsis.

Though *Romola*, *Dorothea*, and *Mirah* are all associated with Antigone in *Romola* (246-7), *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*, respectively, *Romola*’s plot gives us the most schematic sense of how Eliot introduced her thinking about that play into her novels.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, *Romola* helps us contrast the Antigone understanding of tragedy as

---

<sup>19</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (NYC: Penguin, 1994), 190; *Daniel Deronda* (NYC: Oxford World’s Classics, 2014), 311. All subsequent citations to these novels will be parenthetical by page number.

the conflict between two incommensurate principles with a more inchoate sense of tragedy that it supersedes. When Romola is thrown into a feeling of powerlessness by her dawning sense of the labyrinthine nature of Tito's deceptions, she finds even good news fearful: "Romola was now alive to every suggestion likely to deepen her foreboding, that whatever the present might be, it was only an unconscious brooding over the mixed germs of Change which might any day become tragic" (496). This feeling of helplessness has been largely cultivated by Tito who "arrested her intellect" by flashing an image of "hopeless complexity in affairs which defied moral judgment" (495). Here, Romola's apprehension of tragedy is merely the paralyzing sense that every course of action carries with it further vulnerability to disaster. That unstructured sense of tragedy is displaced later in the novel when Romola has an encounter with Savonarola that confronts her with an Antigone conflict between rival principles. Romola appeals to Savonarola to prevent the execution of her godfather by interposing, as he has in the past, and he replies that "these affections must give way to the needs of the Republic" (575-6). Unlike the inchoate sense of tragedy that Tito had induced in her, Romola can actually gain something from this confrontation with Savonarola. When Romola hears of her godfather's execution, she experiences a feeling of sublime elevation:

She needed no arm to support her; she shed no tears. She felt that intensity of life which seems to transcend both grief and joy – in which the mind seems to itself akin to elder forces that wrought out existence before the birth of pleasure and pain. Since her godfather's fate had been decided, the previous struggle of feeling in her had given way to an identification of herself with him in these supreme moments: she was inwardly asserting for him that, if he suffered the punishment of treason, he did not deserve the name of traitor; he was the victim to a collision between two kinds of faithfulness. (583)

This is the kind of ecstasy that Carlyle's writing tries to induce in its readers over and over again, but where Carlyle tries to convince us that that there are countless ways in

which we might participate in the creative energies of the universe, Eliot ascends to these heights—“in which the mind seems to itself akin to elder forces that wrought out existence before the birth of pleasure and pain”—along a singularly terrible path defined by the violence of “a collision between two kinds of faithfulness.” The result is a simplification of Romola’s sympathies that will not last, “an identification of herself with him in these supreme moments,” but this simplifying moment of crisis gives her a precedent for imagining the possibility of having a definite role in history, without being able to know what it is. Romola sees in commitment to a principle the prospect of claiming the terms on which one will have been incorporated into history, even when one has no choice in the consequences of one’s commitment to principle.

And the lesson sticks. Romola articulates her version of Eliot’s tragic view of history in the novel’s Epilogue when Lillo asks her what he will be when he grows up. She suggests that he could be a scholar like her father, if he likes. Lillo asks what became of her father, and Romola replies that he was abandoned by his son, went blind, despaired of turning to “the things that would have made his learning of greater use to men,” and died. The child, showing the level of brazenness that the scene demands, says, “I should like to be something that would make me a great man, and very happy besides – something that would not hinder me from having a good deal of pleasure.” This gives Romola a chance to get very real with her step son, informing him that no one is safe from calamity and that those who commit themselves to a higher purpose, like her father or her erstwhile mentor Savanarola, are at least given relief in that elevating vocation, whereas people who have no commitments face calamity with such a lack of inner

resources that they “may well say, – ‘It would have been better for me if I had never been born.’” According to Romola, one recognizes

“the best things God has put within reach of men [by] having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it is good” (674-5).

The novel, by this point, has shown that “feeling for the rest of the world” is never as simple as this formulation would suggest, but if Romola’s conclusion fails to represent the full sophistication of the novel’s thinking about sympathy, it does capture what Romola learned from the Antigone tragedy that she has experienced. People may be pulled in conflicting ways by their sympathies, but if one exalts the commitments that one finds through one’s sympathies, then one’s very disappointments and defeats will confirm that one is participating in the driving processes of history as a whole, without needing to advance a completed view of what that relationship to history will ultimately entail.

This Antigone structure is highly adaptable, so one can find instances of it even in situations where it is hard to say that there are particular principles underpinning an unavoidable conflict between two people. In *Middlemarch*, for example, it seems to have influenced the terms on which Eliot develops the scene leading up to Dorothea’s resolve “to see and save Rosamond” (790). She describes how Dorothea is tormented by “two images – two living forms that tore her heart in two, as if it had been the heart of a mother who seems to see her child divided by the sword, and presses one bleeding half to her breast while her gaze goes forth in agony towards the half which is carried away by the lying woman that has never known the mother’s pang” (786). This vision of Solomon

actually halving the baby begins the process by which she confronts the possibility that Will Ladislaw is not as trustworthy or good as she had hoped. She begins by treating him as a passive, inert infant, ripped in two by the lying woman, Rosamond. This leads her to realize that what seems like a violent rending is actually a recognition of the disparity between an earlier imagining of Will and her current disillusionment, between “the bright creature whom she had trusted” and “the Will Ladislaw who was a changed belief exhausted of hope, a detected illusion – no, a living man towards whom there could not yet struggle any wail of regretful pity” (786-7). This initial attempt to convert Will into an idea, “a changed belief,” an “illusion,” is not successful, but out of that struggle comes the possibility of seeing her own emotions as like another person. The next morning, Dorothea wakes up “with the clearest consciousness that she was looking into the eyes of sorrow. [...] She was no longer wrestling with her grief, but could sit down with it as a lasting companion and make it a sharer in her thoughts” (787). Dorothea has tried to define whatever it is that opposes her happiness as a person and an idea, but even though she cannot convince herself that it is Rosamond or Will or simply an idea of Will, the attempt to do so has turned her own response to this grief into a sort of double and a companion. The very process of grasping out for someone to wrestle with has given a human shape to her own feelings instead. This is the occasion that produces the famous description of her resolve: “all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance” (788). When she recognizes herself as in a “crisis [...] in three lives whose contact with hers laid an obligation on her as if they had been suppliants bearing the sacred branch,” when she goes to the window and feels “the

largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labor and endurance,” feels that “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” she has been led to experience the primordial energies of the universe like Romola had, even though the opposing position has been an object of conjecture at every step of the way.

### 3.2: George Eliot's Typologies

George Eliot's Antigonic view of tragedy lets her narrators and sometimes even her characters renarrate life's intractable, exhausting conflicts as the necessary condition of participating in the fundamental forces of history itself. But such a representational strategy is limited by its sublimity: it hearkens after a view of history as a totality in which everyone can be assured a definite role, but such a view of oneself as the driving will within some moment of history's dialectic gives one little purchase on the specific complexities of one's situation. Increasingly, in her later work, Eliot's narrators and her characters converge on a shared strategy for contending with the troubling uncertainty and vulnerability of seeing oneself as situated in history: typology, the interpretive practice of understanding an event or person as a repetition of an earlier event or person, and doing so in terms of some spiritual connection between the two.<sup>20</sup> When typology is invoked in Eliot's novels, the continuities at issue are generally psychological, rather than spiritual. Still, as I will discuss below, the connection is nonetheless typically treated by her narrators and her characters as having the fatefulness and authority of something approaching a transcendent sign. Typology serves a similar function to Antigonic tragedy for Eliot, because it allows her characters to engage with collective history in terms of individual psychology, but it also lets them use that very appeal to historical models as a distancing medium, a mechanism for taking a detached view on various aspects of their lives.

---

<sup>20</sup> In his seminal 1938 essay, "Figura," Erich Auerbach emphasizes that typology is distinguished from other interpretive practices that it resembles, such as allegory, by its historicity: "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life." Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), 53.

While typological interpretation appears throughout Eliot's writing, it takes on a particularly marked role in *Middlemarch*, where its presence is flamboyantly announced at the outset by the narrator's famous invocation of St. Theresa as the precursor to Dorothea. It becomes a peculiar obsession for the novel's characters, who routinely interpret themselves and each other as repetitions of historical figures. I will be arguing for the continuity of this tendency in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, but I want to flag here the complex set of distinctions that inevitably emerge when this topic is manifested in a novel set in the present, rather than in a historical novel. Typology represents the prospect of successfully interpreting oneself or another person in relation to history. When such a prospect is seen from an imagined retrospect, as it is in *Middlemarch*, it offers a relief from the rigors of sympathy—the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of living through the relationships available in one's sociohistorical situation—by simulating a transcendent perspective. But when such a prospect is confronted in the present, as it is for the central characters in *Daniel Deronda*, typology can instead heighten the mortification of acceding to one's sociohistorical situation precisely by giving that accession a sublime fatefulness. Typology takes on an almost pathological dimension in the ongoing present of *Daniel Deronda*, where the prospect of being the double of a contemporary suggests a coercive fatalism that is at once dreaded and desired.

The typological practices in Eliot's novels exemplify how she uses narrative strategies to develop a moral psychology that is adequate for historicism, though not for that reason comforting or reassuring. Sympathy and typology can both be thought of as forms of interested speculation about other minds, but with fundamentally different

temporal bearings. Sympathy is typically oriented towards the present, and not only when it responds to the urgency of suffering; more fundamentally, sympathy is keyed to the contingencies of emotion, which can come and go without becoming an integral part of a person's psyche. In Eliot's typology, on the other hand, the psychological continuity between two people arises in spite of historical contingency, thereby simulating a paradoxical phenomenon, a profoundly limited transcendence. If Eliot's investment in typology suggests that she continues to perceive the refusal of a transcendent view of history as a sacrifice, one that could be expected to come with a desire for compensation, then her historicism relies upon an implicit set of assumptions about moral psychology, in particular about the structures of motivation and consolation that it offers to those who commit to its tenets. We don't have to take the refusal of a transcendent view of history as hard as Eliot does, but her sense of a loss is worth reflection, not only because it helps us recover the self-disciplining disposition that has been deemphasized in some recent studies of Eliot, but also because it illustrates a pivotal phase in the emergence of historicism more generally

### Typology as Psychology in History

While Eliot's plots tend to emphasize the sociohistorical conditions in which her characters operate, typological thinking lets her novels posit that their characters have a relationship to history that transcends the interpersonal scale to which their experiences are confined. As Carolyn Williams has shown, the historical orientation of typology took on a special significance in nineteenth-century literature as a mechanism for representing

historical self-consciousness.<sup>21</sup> Eliot's particular renovation of typology is shaped and given its richness by her reading of Ludwig Feuerbach, whose work she translated in 1854. The reinterpretation of Christianity as a projection of human psychology in Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* displaces the project of Biblical exegesis onto psychological grounds, attempting to find the significance of religious history in a reconstruction of the subjective states that have shaped it.<sup>22</sup> When Eliot's narrator introduces her typological practice in the "Prelude" of *Middlemarch*, it is psychological in nature: Dorothea is to be taken as a repetition of the type of St. Theresa, not because of their connection in a larger spiritual order, but rather because of a psychological affinity between them.<sup>23</sup> And yet, Eliot's typologies offer a simulation of transcendence that inevitably remains informed by Christian eschatology. Her translation of Feuerbach is a useful reference point. Feuerbach argues that religion is based in the universal human drive to overcome finitude: "the sense of limitation is painful, and hence the individual frees himself from it by the contemplation of the perfect Being."<sup>24</sup> What is distinct about

---

<sup>21</sup> Williams has also made suggestive comments about typology in *Daniel Deronda* as part of a larger discussion of Eliot's "disavowal, assimilation, and sublimation" of melodrama: there is a formal homology between the "metafigural figure" of a person "posed against or emerging from within a background [...] to suggest the dynamics of historical emergence" and the melodramatic tableau, with both creating a dialectic between the detached instance and the sequential unfolding of time. As I will argue below, the very detachment offered by typological interpretation is explored extensively by Eliot's characters in *Middlemarch* and problematized in the ongoing present of *Daniel Deronda*'s narrative. Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989), 206-12. "Moving Pictures: George Eliot and Melodrama," *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (NYC: Routledge, 2004), 134, 123, 142 n.26, 134.

<sup>22</sup> Feuerbach articulates the psychological underpinning of his projects in the introductions of *The Essence of Christianity*. He asserts that religion has its "basis in the essential difference between man and the brute," with the form of man's psychological complexity shaping the form of religious belief. When Karl Marx critiques him in his famous "Theses on Feuerbach," it is on the grounds that Feuerbach's materialism overemphasizes the psychology of "an abstract—isolated—human individual" understood in terms inherited from idealist philosophers. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2008) 1. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (NYC: Norton, 1978), 143-5. Cf. Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005). 104-6.

<sup>23</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (NYC: Penguin, 2003), 3. All subsequent citations will be parenthetical.

<sup>24</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2008) 127.

Christianity, is that it offers that prospect of transcendence through identification with Christ, who is “not the central, but the terminal point of history,” the point at which “the distinction of the individual from the race [...] ceases [and thus] history ceases; the very soul of history ceases.”<sup>25</sup> According to Feuerbach, the transcendence that Christ offers is modeled on the compensation that people actually find in their affinities for each other: the infinite potential of humanity cannot be reflected in any finite individual, but it is continually suggested to us by the differences in the people who we encounter, who represent to us the “real existence” of “an infinite reciprocally compensating variety.”<sup>26</sup> Christ, by being both infinite and finite, epitomizes the transcendence of limitations that is dimly suggested when finite individuals apprehend each other’s differences. For Feuerbach, the move to concentrate the “compensating variety” of humanity in the figure of Christ reflects the Christian response to a universal, eschatological drive to transcend the limitations of one’s finitude, which Christianity treats as the transcendence of history itself. Eliot was steeped in Feuerbach’s moral psychology, and it shapes the way in which she simultaneously simulates and forecloses transcendence in her novels as a compensation for the distressing experience of limitation.

In Eliot’s fiction, the contemplation of Christ doesn’t supersede the compensating variety that people offer to each other, but the frequent appeals to typology over and above the experience of sympathy, reflect a continuing drive to satisfy the longing for transcendence as it is defined by Feuerbach. Eliot is most explicit about the nature of that drive in the moment when Dorothea thinks of herself on the model of Saint Theresa, rather than in the moment in which the narrator designates her as a modern-day Theresa

---

<sup>25</sup> Feuerbach 128.

<sup>26</sup> Feuerbach 131.

in the “Prelude” and the “Finale.” The example of Theresa reenters the novel when Dorothea meditates on what she hopes to find in her marriage to Casaubon. The initial, superficial contrast is between “that toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies” and the “new vistas” that she finds in Casaubon’s talk, which brings the “surprise of a nearer introduction to Stoics and Alexandrines, as people who had ideas not totally unlike her own.” The deeper contrast, though is between this feeling of contact with the past, and the desire that it promises to satisfy but only “kept in abeyance,” held in a state of suspension. What she ultimately wants is not a “nearer introduction” to the people of the past, but rather “a binding theory which could bring her own life and doctrine into strict connection with that amazing past,” something “by which her life might be filled with action at once rational and ardent.” We get a gloss on this condition of vocation, and it is Saint Theresa. Dorothea does not merely want contact with the past: “She did not want to deck herself with knowledge – to wear it loose from the nerves and blood that fed her action; and if she had written a book she must have done it as Saint Theresa did, under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience” (86). The view of history that Dorothea rebels against seems like a “toy-box” to her, not primarily because it is infantilized, but rather because it makes history merely a loose collection of interesting figures with no “binding theory” revealed or “strict connection” offered by its study. What Dorothea wants, and what she hopes to get from her marriage to Casaubon, is a transcendent recognition of the way in which her psychology could be incorporated into history. If Dorothea’s own desire to be like another instance of St. Theresa gives us a richer sense of the way in which typology serves Eliot’s moral psychology than the novel’s “Prelude” does, it is because this typological interpretation is not the kind of

compensation that could be offered by an omniscient narrator. In this passage of free indirect discourse, Dorothea is giving herself an intimation of that kind of assurance; by doing so, she demonstrates a repeatable and adaptable strategy for actively acceding to one's sociohistorical situation.

When Eliot's characters attempt typological interpretations, their projections inevitably come up against the limitations of their sociohistorical situation. Dorothea's attempt to repeat the kind of transcendent commitment epitomized by Saint Theresa initially sends her seeking Casaubon's authority to help situate her psyche in a strict connection with the large truths of history. But that authority has a distinctly temporal basis, even in these early idealizations, because it is dependent on Dorothea's typological interpretation of him. The narrator presents Casaubon as a mere proxy, arrived at by default: "Since the time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors, since prayer heightened yearning but not instruction, what lamp was there but knowledge? Surely learned men kept the only oil; and who more learned than Mr. Casaubon?" (86-7). Yet Dorothea has not only been set up for disappointment by the inadequacies of the available proxy, but more fundamentally by her whole scheme for transcendence: her method for construing Casaubon as an authority has already depended upon a series of typological interpretations of him. In particular, Dorothea develops a vision of Casaubon as John Milton. She enters upon this idea by comparing him to great intellects with bad marriages who might have been better served by her companionship; but between a conception of Casaubon as a repetition of Richard Hooker or of John Milton, the latter association is the one that develops over the course of their relationship, specifically in terms of Milton's pretense of divine inspiration, his ventriloquizing an "affable

archangel" (10; 24).<sup>27</sup> Typology registers Dorothea's desire to have a transcendent knowledge of her place in history, but it still depends upon her construal of another person's psychology. The ultimate extension of what is, in the final analysis, a reading practice is only made possible from the third-person retrospect of the novel's "Prelude" and "Finale," which can confirm Dorothea as a repetition of Theresa in a way that she herself cannot.

In most of Eliot's novels, written with historical retrospect, the view of individuals as parts of a larger history can be affirmed by the narrator, but the tension between narratorial omniscience and the characters' clearly speculative attempts at typology is vital nevertheless for the complex vision of the intersection of history and individual psychology in the text. The narrator can use the characters' attempts at typology as signs of the subtle and manifold ways in which they're a part of their historical moment. What is uneasily speculative for the characters can be redeemed by the narrator as proof of their place within larger historical processes.

When Eliot's characters invoke typological interpretation, they register a desire to situate themselves and the people that they encounter in a definite relationship to history as a whole, a desire that Eliot's narrator both honors and compartmentalizes by

---

<sup>27</sup> Dorothea's interpretation of Casaubon as John Milton persists through their courtship, and it breaks down at the moment when Dorothea's ultimate disillusionment with him begins. During their courtship, Dorothea offers to "read Latin and Greek aloud to you, as Milton's daughters did to their father, without understanding what they read" (63). Later, the narrator, taking Dorothea's side, defends Casaubon from the negative judgments of her family and neighbors, saying, "even Milton, looking for his portrait in a spoon, must submit to have the facial angle of a bumpkin" (84). But when he preemptively denies her a visit from Will Ladislav before she even indicates that she desires such "visits which might be disagreeable to her husband" it causes "too sharp a sting to be meditated on until after it had been resented. Dorothea had thought that she could have been patient with John Milton, but she had never imagined him behaving in this way; and for a moment, Mr. Casaubon seemed to be stupidly undiscerning and odiously unjust." (282). The narrator notes that this is the first clash since their honeymoon. While Casaubon has been unpleasant before, it is significant that the moment at which he loses his authority and seems "undiscerning" and "unjust" is the moment when her interpretation of him as a second Milton fails.

reinforcing the ways in which their view of history as a whole is always a product of their particular position. Eliot has her characters invoke typologies in ways that draw special attention to the variability in interpretations of exemplary individuals. She recasts even the appeal of historical types in terms of the psychological affinities that people form.

When Will Ladislav and his fellow painter Naumann gaze at Dorothea in Rome, Naumann gives his own typological interpretation to rival the narrator's construction of her as a modern-day Theresa, identifying her as a "Christian Antigone" (190).

Naumann's construal of Dorothea comes in the middle of a tendentious disquisition on his aesthetic and philosophical theories, which is only ventilated by Will's protests. But the narrator contextualizes Naumann's claim in a way that lets us approach it with a degree of detachment that his frustrated contemporary cannot feel. Naumann's speech to Will begins right after the narrator has told us that the statue that Dorothea is looking at is "Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra," which comes shortly after the narrator tells us that "even the most brilliant English critic of the day [William Hazlitt] mistook the flower-flushed tomb of the ascended Virgin for an ornamental vase due to the painter's fancy" (188). The narrator's asides about the fraught history of identifying antiquities has a complex implication for Naumann's account of Dorothea. It reminds us that the aesthete's judgment isn't always apt, but Naumann's reasons for construing Dorothea as a Christian Antigone aren't subject to the same sort of correction as the identification of an ancient sculpture: his claim that Dorothea discloses "sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion" is not untrue, just limited. The simplest objection to Naumann's interpretation of Dorothea is that it tells us more about his desires than it does about her, that, like Hazlitt, he has been misled by "the painter's fancy." But the novel presents

Naumann's interpretation of Dorothea with an attention and patience that surpasses its satirical attitude towards his pomposity, and it becomes like Hazlitt's misidentification: more than a mere error, it is suggestive of a certain way of thinking and seeing. Eliot can develop such a complexly multigenerational perspective from the frequent invocations of typology in her novels—not the assumption that later generations will always know more than earlier ones, but that the ways in which people invoke the characters of earlier periods are revealing of their own historical moment.<sup>28</sup> When Eliot's characters appeal to typology, they continually expose something of what is unique about their own situation.

The process of confining the characters' judgments to the historical moment implied by their underlying assumptions helps the narrator build up a sense of the larger coherence of history. Eliot reinforces the possibility of having a more sophisticated awareness of one's place in history by satirizing more simplistic invocations of historical models. Take, for example, Mr. Brooke's continual references to the literary and historical figures that linger in his memory: when he proposes to Casaubon that Will "may turn out a Byron, a Chatterton, a Churchill – that sort of thing" (82), we understand that these are three literary careers marked by controversy and an early demise, but the triplet of references allows him to avoid making any definite prediction about either Will's potential for literary accomplishment or the extent of trouble ahead. To detect

---

<sup>28</sup> Pausing to point out that a sculpture was misidentified in the past might seem like Eliot's narrator at her most officious, but it also reflects the way in which the authority of her narrator is so often modeled on the process of historical retrospect, of having reconstructed the truth in hindsight. The way in which the narrator and the characters converge around the practice of typology accords with Harry Shaw's argument that the narrative voice sometimes seems to desire a "a position in the grain of history" alongside the characters, a tendency which he ultimately reads as Eliot's attempt "to mark the historicity of the world of her novels, and of the one she shares with us, a weight that transforms its seemingly definitive pronouncements into attempts to cope." Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999), 246; 261.

what is dilettantish and trite in Mr. Brooke's attempts to claim some historical perspective lets us feel the power of retrospection.

The pervasive appeals to typology turn history into a sort of running commentary on the present: from it, Eliot's characters can gather a reassuring feeling of detachment by seeing themselves as historically situated, even when those perspectives leave their position much the same. Thus, the use of typological interpretation by her characters often indicates the ways in which their desires or convictions surpass what they can realize in their sociohistorical situations, while easing their acceptance of their situations. To Dorothea, the prospect that history had come down to her as a sort of toy-box is disappointing, because it fails to give her any notion of how its various parts could be assimilated into those larger processes that move the world, but Eliot has her characters turn the toy-box of history into a sort of puppet theater. They play out subtle features of their personal and interpersonal lives by invoking notable characters from the past. When Will introduces Dorothea to Naumann, for example, he makes an oblique criticism of his colleague by announcing that he is "making a sketch of Marlowe's Tamburlaine Driving the Conquered Kings in his Chariot," which he takes "for the tremendous course of the world's physical history" (213). At this point, we have already heard Naumann place himself at the center of a distinctly monomaniacal version of dialectical history, batting aside Will's reservations about him painting Dorothea by insisting that "the universe is straining towards that picture through the particular hook or claw which is put forth in the shape of me," regardless of what resistance he might meet (190), and Will has praised Naumann's painting for presenting "mysteries [...] in relation to which the great souls of all periods became as it were contemporaries." In paralleling his own sketch of

Marlowe's conquering antihero to Naumann "painting the Saints drawing the Car of the Church," Will suggests that aggression and self-aggrandizement are the energies that drive Naumann to conjure the "great souls" of history into a single procession that ends at the tip of his brush. The appeal to historical types concurrently serves the characters that have recourse to it while reinforcing Eliot's larger conception of how a person can felicitously relate their psychology to their situation.

D. A. Miller's influential essay on *Middlemarch* in *Narrative and its Discontents* emphasizes how its characters' desire to find transcendent significance in the everyday is both glorified and contained by the narrative frame itself, the way its characters come to settle for simulations of or substitutes for their earlier desires at the novel's end.<sup>29</sup> We may understand the recourse to typology during the course of the novel to suggest a quite conscious effort on the part of characters to preserve a sense of resolve and satisfaction in spite of diminished prospects. It is part of the novelist's commitment to a disillusioned realism that the typology in her works is shaped by a frustrated desire to reach a definite understanding of how people are incorporated into history. And yet, it is the special dispensation of the historical novel that it can validate its characters as types even while showing that their attempts to define themselves and their contemporaries with typology can be seen in hindsight as a product of their time. For Eliot's characters, the encounter with history remains, primarily, an extension of encountering other people, but the use of typological interpretation can grant a certain feeling of resistance to the relations and routines that define their lives in the present, isolating the obtrusive qualities of themselves or their contemporaries by associating them with some distant figure.

---

<sup>29</sup> D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981), 133-5; 144-5; 148-9.

Sympathy is central to the novel's moral psychology, but so is the feeling of transcendence that one can simulate by having recourse to typology—even when that feeling of transcendence merely adds conviction to one's acceptance of limitations that may have been unavoidable to begin with.

### Typology in the Present

*Daniel Deronda* brings typology into the ongoing present, and, in the process, raises serious doubts about the kinds of imaginative identification that serve characters in Eliot's other novels. In *Middlemarch*, when Dorothea resolves "to see and save Rosamond" (790) after an encounter that leads her to the devastating conclusion that Rosamond and Will are having an affair, the narrator describes how Dorothea gains the strength to make this choice by trying to imagine things from Rosamond's perspective. The result is empowering: "all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance" (788). Dorothea's perspective is transformed in a way that leads her to feel a new obligation, but the process of imaginatively identifying with Rosamond also ensures that she will be capable of rising to the occasion. Sympathy is felt as a gain, even when it tasks us. In *Daniel Deronda*, the effects of sympathy are less clearly enabling and beneficial. The novel's ambivalent relationship to sympathy is structured by the role of typology in the novel. Mordecai re-spiritualizes typology by claiming that souls can be inextricably linked, with one like a repetition of the other. The relationships between Daniel and Mordecai, who claims that Daniel is his spiritual double, and between Daniel and Gwendolen, who comes to feel increasingly desperate to

understand herself on the model of Daniel, occasion a narrative that is fascinated with the forms of coercion that travel with sympathetic identification. In *Deronda*, Eliot continues to foreground sympathy as the mechanism for effective participation in the present and typology as the means by which to imagine one's relationship to history more broadly, but the relationship between the two takes on a distinctly pathological character, which suggests a dark strain to Eliot's conception of sympathy, though one that is often lost in appreciations of the sophistication and pleasure of the novelist's ethics.

Mordecai's mystical ideas give a charismatic and confrontational form to the desire to identify for one's self a transcendent role within history, to understand one's effects on the world and see a larger significance in them. Mordecai believes that Daniel is his double, a figure he has not only anticipated, but sought out for many years, a man who "differed from himself," but who would act for him as an "expanded, prolonged self."<sup>30</sup> And the narrator asks its readers to seriously entertain the possibility that Mordecai might be correct in believing that he has successfully apprehended his singular role in history, as well as Daniel's (431). Mordecai's understanding of history depends upon his belief that certain individual psyches act as inflection points in it: "were not men of ardent zeal and far-reaching hope everywhere exceptional?—the men who had the visions which, as Mordecai said, were the creators and feeders of the world—molding and feeding the more passive life which without them would dwindle and shrivel into the narrow tenacity of insects, unshaken by thoughts beyond the reaches of their antennae" (576-7). Mordecai's conviction that he knows his own role in history is supported by his belief that typology is a literal, spiritual truth, not a merely a conceptual tool for relating

---

<sup>30</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (NYC: Oxford UP, 2014), 399-400. All subsequent citations will be parenthetical.

psychology to history: for him, certain souls really are interconnected through history. When Mordecai describes the formation of his world-moving soul, he does so on the model of metempsychosis, describing his soul's journey since the middle ages (421). All of these reincarnations would be instances of the same soul, connected by a common purpose. Mordecai is a source of fascination for the narrator and Daniel, both of whom indulge him in long expositions of his theories and prophecies—both of whom are magnetized by his charisma. Yet there is a crucial disconnect between Daniel's interest in Mordecai and Mordecai's interest in Daniel: Mordecai only conceives of Daniel as his double within the larger spiritual necessity of bringing about a return to Zion, but for Daniel and, by extension, the novel, the uneasy prospect of identification with Mordecai becomes the crucible in which his own convictions will be tested.

To perform a typological interpretation of oneself in relation to one's contemporaries is to undergo the subjection to one's role in history in real time, with all of the uncertainty and emotional torsion of attempting to bring one's prospects and obligations into line with one's sympathy for a particular person. While the novel indulges Mordecai's more messianic pretensions, it ultimately demonstrates just how much anxiety and resistance must be worked through to produce his sole convert. Daniel does occasionally give the impression of "passive life" with "the narrow tenacity of insects," but his neurotic vulnerability is rendered as a far more dynamic and complicated condition than what is suggested by Mordecai's vision of great souls "molding and feeding" an inert multitude. In their interactions, one is continually reminded of the friction between vulnerable, defensive psyches. When Mordecai desperately expresses his conviction that Daniel is his double, the result is that Daniel "become[s] as pallid" as

his interlocutor is and is torn between “a compassionate dread of discouraging this fellow-man” and “the opposing dread of fatally feeding an illusion” (423). By depicting so much strain in its central relationships, the novel suggests why the ethical benefits of sympathy, in Eliot’s earlier novels, so frequently depend upon imagined relationships with distant or absent individuals. In the novel’s first paragraph, the coercive effect of feeling for another person is sounded as a keynote. The narrator, focalized on Daniel, asks, “Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?” (3). The story that follows maps out the subtle forms of coercion that travel with sympathy—the irreducible complexity of human motivations and the corresponding susceptibility to influence in every association. Even Daniel’s investment in Mordecai’s austere and collective project, which aims at the formation of a national identity that is unlikely to be realized within his lifetime, depends on idiosyncratically personal desires and compulsions. The novel attempts to represent that condition “in which the whole being consents” to those sympathies that will shape one’s life, but it nonetheless presents that consent as retroactively reconstructed. The desire to bolster sympathy by simulating a transcendent knowledge of one’s relationship to history has survived, but it carries with it a subjection to one’s sociohistorical situation in the form of other people’s ineffable power over our feelings.

Where characters in *Middlemarch* could use typological interpretation as a way to assert a feeling of control over their relations, even when that control may best be understood as a retroactive assent to the limitations of their position, *Daniel Deronda* transforms those structures into sources of anxiety and vulnerability. In his adolescence, Daniel is led to suspect that illegitimate birth is hidden in the ambiguities of his own

history while he is learning about the corrupt popes of the Renaissance. By entertaining the thought that there might be a connection between his own history and these popular exemplars of vice, an uncertainty bursts into his life that immediately leads him to rethink what he has assumed about the exemplary individuals of history in a way that deepens his sense of unease about his own history:

The first shock of suggestion past, he could remember that he had no certainty how things really had been, and that he had been making conjectures about his own history, as he had often made stories about Pericles or Columbus, just to fill up the blanks before they became famous (140).

Daniel's central anxiety about himself, which leads directly to his neurotic tendency to sympathize with everyone at the expense of developing a clear sense of self or vocation, is a feeling that there is something already true about himself which would override everything else that he has known about himself. That fear enters into his life as a ghostly double, which would be the finished interpretation of who he really is:

Daniel felt the presence of a new guest who seemed to come with an enigmatic veiled face, and to carry dimly-conjectured, dreaded revelations. The ardor which he had given to the imaginary world in his books suddenly rushed towards his own history and spent its pictorial energy there, explaining what he knew, representing the unknown (139).

Daniel is grasping after a typological interpretation of himself, another person who would act as the model of what he is. When Mordecai enters Daniel's life, this is what he expressly claims to be. Though Daniel is far happier to entertain the idea that he really is Mordecai's double than that he is another instance of the sheltered bastards of the corrupt Catholic past, the narrator describes the feeling of vulnerability that comes with his interest in Mordecai's prophecies. As she prepares to introduce Mordecai's belief that Daniel is his double, the narrator says that those who can claim to have a "second-sight," make prophecies that "continually take the form of images," which means that "the deed

they would do starts up before them in complete shape, making a coercive type” (398).

This is one of many references to coercion in *Deronda*, and it exemplifies what is distinctive about the novel’s use of the term.<sup>31</sup> None of its uses refer to bodily or otherwise material coercion, and almost all of them refer to unintentional, indirect exercises of coercion. If Daniel feels an affinity for Mordecai, then what Daniel encounters vividly in Mordecai has a preemptive power to insinuate something about himself. It is as though Mordecai has been imposed upon him as an ineluctable piece of typology, showing him what he is another instance of—with a conclusiveness as disturbing as it is abrupt.

Gwendolen’s narrative deepens the anxiety and vulnerability of typology, because it moves the typological framework entirely outside of the structure of messianic religion and into the more unruly realm of the occult, of doubles and hauntings. Gwendolen imagines both Grandcourt and Daniel as her ghostly doubles; she becomes fixated on her unrealized desire to consummate her identification with Daniel as the only relief from her identification with Grandcourt. There is a particularly insidious influence caused by the double-bind that comes with her marriage to Grandcourt: because she knew about his abandonment of his first wife, and because she helped to make it final by marrying him, she’s made to feel like a coparticipant in his cruelty even after she becomes the new object of it. But the effects of sympathy itself take on a strangely discouraging quality as her investment in Daniel becomes more unrequited. After their conversation at Sir Hugo’s Abbey, the narrator notes that “in some mysterious way he was becoming part of her conscience” (350), a process that we have seen in earlier Eliot novels, like in the

---

<sup>31</sup> See also, 3, 227, 274, 318, 363, 532, 545.

moment when Dorothea's consciousness is expanded and her resolve fortified by sympathizing with Rosamond. Initially, the text suggests the possibility of an imaginative relationship, in which Gwendolen's feeling of affinity for the idea of Daniel becomes a way for her to rethink her situation. As the narrator puts it:

No chemical process shows a more wonderful activity than the transforming influence of the thoughts we imagine to be going on in another. Changes in theory, religion, admirations, may begin with a suspicion of dissent or disapproval, even when the grounds of disapproval are but matter of searching conjecture (357).

Eliot's novels amply illustrate how conjectures about other people can lead to changes in theory, religion, admirations; what the events of *Daniel Deronda* suggest is that the influence of other people is most fruitful when it remains a matter of searching conjecture. Perversely, the prospect of forming a real relationship with Daniel makes Gwendolyn's feeling of an affinity for him into an inhibition. As she struggles to believe that she hasn't doomed herself through her complicity in Grandcourt's abandonment of his wife and son, she becomes fixated on receiving Daniel's judgment, but without feeling able to tell him what has happened. For much of the novel, Gwendolen feels herself watched by ghostly presences, and hearkening after Daniel's actual opinions about her only deepens the haunting sense of surveillance: "The struggle of opposite feelings would not let her abide by her instinct that the very idea of Deronda's relation to her was a discouragement to any desperate step towards freedom. The next wave of emotion was a longing for some word of his to enforce a resolve" (512). Though the narrator pays tribute to the transformative benefits we can experience by feeling an affinity for another person, Daniel's encouragement leaves Gwendolen in a state of dependence:

So potent in us is the infused action of another soul, before which we bow in complete love. But the new existence seemed inseparable from Deronda: the hope seemed to make his presence permanent. It was not her thought, that he loved her and would cling to her—a thought would have tottered with improbability: it was her spiritual breath. For the first time since that terrible moment at sea a flush rose. (648)

Not only does this passage tremble with Gwendolen's desperation, it also suggests how Daniel's power over her has been prepared for by her abusive relationship with Grandcourt. The unexplained distinction between "thought" and "spiritual breath," which makes the passage difficult to parse at first, turns on her inability to enjoy the "infused action of [Daniel's] soul" without it becoming a spiritual necessity to her, a state of ghostly possession. If Gwendolen has been in a deathly pallor since the drowning of her unwanted double, Grandcourt, in whose crime she had come to feel a coparticipant, and if Daniel becomes like her "spiritual breath," a phrase that emphasizes through redundancy the root of the word spirit in breath, then he not only revives her, but also becomes her personal savior for a life without her drowned double.

### Sympathy and the Present after Typology

Sympathy generally attends to the present, typology to the past. In *Daniel Deronda*, however, typology is pressed into the present, which makes the prospect of identifying with another person fraught with urgent but uncertain consequences—urgent because of the immediate presence of one's double, uncertain because the implications of being associated with that person are still unfolding. What Daniel and the narrator attempt to take from Mordecai's mystical typology is a revivification of the demands of living in the present, brought to urgency by the question of whether to develop or resist one's sympathies for other people. The nature of their fascination is suggested in a

moment in which the narrator directs the reader to approach Mordecai's prophecies as gamely as we would consider the theories of a second Copernicus or Galileo: "Shall we say, 'Let the ages try the spirits, and see what they are worth?' Why, we are the beginning of the ages, which can only be just by virtue of just judgments in separate human breasts—separate yet combined" (431). This is a distinctly labored exhortation, and the idea that it strains to convey is that we are living in the present, as though that were hard to realize: not only does it remind us that our personal certainties were produced by collective activity, not only does it call upon us to join in the task of testing new ideas, it urges us to remember that such a process depends upon a "beginning of ages" made in "separate human breasts" that will become "separate yet combined," provided they converge around shared projects in a shared present. What the narrator proposes as a standard for judging Mordecai could just as well act as a gloss on what Daniel takes from Mordecai: that judging ideas is, in part, a matter of managing our affinities for other people in the present. The prospect of finding collective life by making "judgments in separate human breasts—separate yet combined" anticipates Daniel's later aspiration after "separateness with communication." He offers this formulation as his "grandfather's notion" for balancing identity with a more cosmopolitan dialogism when Kalonymos asks, "You will call yourself a Jew and profess the faith of your fathers?" (609), thus using an imaginative identification with his absent forefather to assert control over the boundaries of his identity in the present. Daniel and the narrator's responses to Mordecai give a special value to separateness precisely because Mordecai's sway over

Daniel (and the narrator, for that matter) has shown that such detachment cannot be taken for granted and must be actively guarded.<sup>32</sup>

Sympathy, in *Daniel Deronda*, is transformed by the impulse towards typology, the impulse to discover one's role in history on the model of other persons. The "beginning of the ages" might be made in "separate human breasts—separate yet combined," but that prospect has an odd corollary: the novel increasingly suggests the fear that sympathizing with someone can set in motion a reinterpretation of oneself that may prove irreversible. By continually projecting out the possible implications of sympathy, the novel finds arbitrary coercions everywhere that it looks. The very complexity and many-sidedness of human psychology comes to seem like the condition of our vulnerability to the influence of other people. The narrator makes a point of asserting that people can hold mixed and even contrary feelings in an instant (33) and that "our speech, even when we are most single-minded can never take its line absolutely from one impulse" (216), and we find that two of the novel's patriarchs have learned to take advantage of this fact. Gascoigne, a rector who is used to being "morally coercive" (227) raises in Gwendolen "the force of sensations" and "her resistant courage would not help her here, because her uncle was not urging her against her own resolve; he was pressing upon her the motives of dread which she already felt" (118). At another moment, Sir Hugo advises Daniel on the advantage of ruling other people by their own ideas (322). People, with their mixed feelings and partialities, present many levers to the world, and

---

<sup>32</sup> Rae Greiner also argues that detachment becomes crucial to Eliot's conception of sympathy, because "only a sympathy that maintains a separation between self and others enables ethical choice, the ability to decide which sentiments to endorse and which to let die or resurrect." For Greiner, this indicates a shift in the role of sympathy within realism more generally, a precedent continued in the work of Joseph Conrad and Henry James. Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2012), 159; 125.

this susceptibility to influence extends to a person's moral sense: "Our consciences are not all of the same pattern, an inner deliverance of fixed laws: they are the voice of sensibilities as various as our memories (which also have their kinship and likeness)" (431). Even the substitution of memories and their implied sympathies for what is commonly supposed to be the "fixed laws" of the conscience can give way to more idiosyncratic, more arbitrary conditions: "The beings closest to us, whether in love or hate, are often virtually our interpreters of the world, and some feather-headed gentleman or lady whom in passing we regret to take as legal tender for a human being may be acting as a melancholy theory of life in the minds of those who live with them" (566). In these claims about our susceptibility to the influence of others, we have more than an awareness of how pervasive coercion is in human relations. Because our feelings are never simple, identifying with another person can easily amplify one of our tendencies and take us further under someone else's control as they become our "interpreters of the world," our type, merely by their presence.

The embodiment and eroticism in Eliot's novels has come to be seen as epitomizing her admirable embrace of ethics in an immanent frame—indeed, the keynote for talking about eroticism in Eliot was struck by Catherine Gallagher's essay "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian"<sup>33</sup>—but, in *Daniel Deronda*, even eroticism comes to be

---

<sup>33</sup> Eroticism and embodiment in Eliot have received broad consideration in recent years, some of which has directly respond to Gallagher's formulations while exploring other areas of research—notably, David Kurnick, who uses the erotics of *Middlemarch* to rethink the role of desire in narratology, and S. Pearl Brilmyer, who explores the connection between the plasticity of matter and psychology in late nineteenth century scientific discourses. Summer J. Star and Christina Richieri Griffin both use Eliot's attention to embodiment to argue for the processual nature of sympathy in her work, breaking with more detached conceptions of sympathy that sequester it in cognition. Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," *Representations* 90 (2005), 61–74. David Kurnick, "An Erotics of Detachment: *Middlemarch* and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice," *ELH* 74, no. 3 (2007): 583–608; S. Pearl Brilmyer, "Plasticity, Form, and the Matter of Character in *Middlemarch*," *Representations* 130 (2015), 60–83; Summer J. Star,

understood in terms of a reinterpretation of oneself on the model of another person. The novel's first paragraph contrasts coercion with "a longing in which the whole being consents" (3), and, when Daniel is speaking to his mother for the first time, she proposes a similar sentiment, arguing that "We only consent to what we love" (531). The novel casts a very specific form of doubt on this idea, which is that the feeling of love itself is initiated by a process to which one does not consent. Indeed, in their second meeting, Leonora says to Daniel, "I know very well what love makes of men and women—it is subjection" (561). Even when the novel defends the possibility of a truly elevating and worthy love, it does so in terms that embrace and attempt to redeem the coercive features of love:

To have the consciousness suddenly steeped with another's personality, to have the strongest inclinations possessed by an image which retains its dominance in spite of change and apart from worthiness—nay, to feel a passion which clings faster for the tragic pangs inflicted by a cruel, reorganized unworthiness—is a phase of love which in the feeble and common-minded has a repulsive likeness to his blind animalism insensible to the higher sway of moral affinity or heaven-lit admiration. But when this attaching force is present in a nature not of brutish unmodifiableness, but of a human dignity that can risk itself safely, it may even result in a devotedness not unfit to be called divine in a higher sense than the ancient (597).

Love is divine, but, of course, divinities often exercise some power of compulsion. The "attaching force" is the same, whether it moves us in relation to a "reorganized unworthiness" or "a human dignity that can risk itself safely." This description of being "steeped with another's personality" and "possessed by an image" is reminiscent of what was described as "coercive" in the prophetic personality, the way in which those who can claim to have a "second-sight" make prophecies that "continually take the form of

---

"Feeling Real in *Middlemarch*," *ELH* (80:3) Fall 2013, 859; 862; Christina Richieri Griffin "George Eliot's Feuerbach: Senses, Sympathy, Omniscience, and Secularism," *ELH* 84.2 (Summer 2017): 476.

images,” which means that “the deed they would do starts up before them in complete shape, making a coercive type” (398). Here, love, like sympathy, is presented as a certain organization of our existing susceptibilities on the model of particular people. Love, like Eliot’s other sacrifices, is presented with supreme dignity, but it takes on the quality of a sacrifice precisely because it is expected to give way to an identification that leads a person to reorganize their aspirations and their self-understanding.

The fact that Eliot attempts to find a way of happily acceding to the coercive features of sympathy and love needn’t be viewed as a problem or as contradicting appreciative accounts of her ethical thinking that have tended to deemphasize its more self-disciplining and self-denying aspects. Instead, my reason for dwelling on these dimensions is to show how Eliot’s thinking about sympathy is inflected by another aspect of her thinking about the moral psychology of historicism, a drive towards transcendence that imparts a foreshortening fatalism on relations that might otherwise have a more open-ended character. Catherine Gallagher describes the way that Eliot’s characterization pivots between pointing outwards towards a set of real-world examples and pointing internally towards the particularity of its characters. By considering this appeal to the particular as an engine of Eliot’s ethics and then her erotics, the essay suggests that Eliot’s narration puts its characters on display in a context of assessment where they are desired, and that this individuating desire helps us learn to value other individuals as finely as ourselves. One of the more provocative claims of the essay is that its turn from ethics to erotics is not as peculiar as we might imagine—she notes that there are several other nineteenth century texts (“Lamia” and “The Blessed Damozel” are her examples) where particularity is desired in the form of embodiment, rather than generalization in the

form of spiritual transcendence, so that erotic desire becomes both a motivation and a model for ethics within an immanent frame.<sup>34</sup> Still, embodiment is only one mode of particularity, and a peculiar one, because its enticements and its dangers can be felt in the flesh. It can be misleadingly easy to conceive of individuation when prompted by pleasure and the hope of pleasure or pain and the fear of pain. The desire for particularity is a polymorphous phenomenon, one that potentially encompasses hopes that could only be satisfied if one were able to take a transcendent perspective on one's place in history. In *Daniel Deronda*, in particular, both the desire for other people and the desire for a particular identity are intensified to the point of desperation by the wish to feel oneself historically, to attain the intimation of a transcendent perspective on one's situation. Gallagher compellingly shows how eroticism draws ethics into an immanent frame in *Middlemarch*, but this dimension of Eliot's ethics is flanked even there by a coexisting desire to simulate a transcendent knowledge of one's place in history. *Deronda* shows the uneasiness with which these two aspects of Eliot's moral psychology coexist, the way in which sympathy and even eroticism can be transformed by the desire to take a transcendent view of oneself.

If *Deronda* presents the sacrifices of sympathy as a reflexive virtue in their starkest form, Eliot's final book helps us conclude our analysis of her ethical thinking by stepping decisively beyond it. In some ways, *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* is a valedictory on Eliot's career, revisiting many of her favorite topics, showing off her striking acuity and incisive humor. But it also suggests a turn against the reflexive virtue that had been central to her novels. It is structured as a series of psychological studies

---

<sup>34</sup> Gallagher 70; 72-3.

given by their fictional author, Theophrastus Such, each showing the development of a disposition that is at least something of a vice, even if it has some positive effects; many of these dispositions bring about the waste of a person's energies or the poisoning of their relationships. It is significant that Theophrastus finds such a series of idiosyncratic dispositions shaped by odd contingencies, because he begins the project with two premises that would seem to suggest the expectation of some positive self-understanding. In "Looking Inward," the first essay, he says, "if I laugh at you, O fellow-men! if I trace with curious interest your labyrinthine self-delusions, [...] it is not that I feel myself aloof from you: the more intimately I seem to discern your weaknesses, the stronger to me is the proof that I share them. How otherwise could I get the discernment?"<sup>35</sup> Though he spends this essay offering up his own foibles, the rest of the book's attention to the formative influence of accidental conditions on individual development makes it implausible that there's such a commonality realized in describing other people's limitations. In the second essay, "Looking Backward," he describes the value he attaches to attending to his contemporaries:

I at least am a modern with some interest in advocating tolerance, and notwithstanding an inborn beguilement which carries my affection and regret continually into an imagined past, I am aware that I must lose all sense of moral proportion unless I keep alive a stronger attachment to what is near, and a power of admiring what I best know and understand.

While he goes on to associate his feeling for his contemporaries with "filial feeling" (16), it is notable that the rest of the book does not tend to use his knowledge of the contemporaries that he depicts to produce any particular sense of his own ethical prospects. *Theophrastus* is sometimes described as moralizing, but one of the curious

---

<sup>35</sup> George Eliot, *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (Rutland, VT: Everyman, 1995), 4. All subsequent citations are parenthetical.

effects of its mode of analysis is to make everyone's particular dispositions seem like accidents of their experience.<sup>36</sup> The book is a last show of Eliot's psychological acuity, but conducted with a striking lack of urgency: everyone's flaws are analyzed, but they're so idiosyncratic, and their formation is so unconscious, that there's no sense that one could draw any edification from reading about them, except to heighten one's awareness of the confounding subtlety of human psychology.

In the book's penultimate essay, "Shadows of the Coming Race," we get a sense of Theophrastus's feeling about his contemporaries, and it calls forth a total dismissal of the project of trying to bring one's psychology into an active relationship with one's historical moment. The essay presents a conversation between Theophrastus and his friend Trost in which Theophrastus predicts the coming of a robot apocalypse which would have "the immense advantage of banishing from the earth's atmosphere screaming consciousness which, in our comparatively clumsy race, make an intolerable noise and fuss to each other about every petty ant-like performance" (130). Not only does he imagine machines supplanting humanity's "screaming consciousness," he imagines that they will benefit from their very lack of self-awareness. They would be "free from the fussy accompaniment of that consciousness to which our prejudice gives a supreme governing rank, when in truth it is an idle parasite on the grand sequence of things" (131). In this essay, the ultimate tribute to "the grand sequence" of collective history is the supersession of human consciousness altogether, the end of its tendency to pull focus to

---

<sup>36</sup> In his introduction, D. J. Enright describes some of the studies as excessive in their severity—"So Young!," "Moral Swindlers," and "Debasing the Moral Currency," in particular—and also cites Leslie Stephen as complaining of the heavy-handedness of the latter essay. He quotes Henry James as objecting to its dependence on abstract types for edifying purposes: "We constantly feel that she cares for the things she finds in it only so far as they are types." Finally, he quotes a criticism from the *Athenaeum* which complains of Eliot's "unsympathy with her own puppets." D. J. Enright, "Introduction," *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (Rutland, VT: Everyman, 1995), xxii-iii; xxvii.

its personal and temporary concerns. Of course, there is no reason to assume that this is Eliot's belief, and even Theophrastus recasts these ideas as "bear[ing] the same relation to real belief as walking on the head for a show does to running away from an explosion or walking fast to catch the train" (154), suggesting that the effortful quality of this particular thought-experiment isn't in the service of persuasion and its intensity is produced for show rather than urged on by circumstances. Nonetheless, it turns the project of *Theophrastus Such* into a sort of limit case: these psychological studies taken from contemporary life don't end in any practical purpose either. The book's final essay is written in a different voice and drops the convention of focusing on fictional exemplars; what's more, it decisively shifts its regard away from the study of individual psychology towards a defense of Jewish identity framed within a defense of national identity more generally. It's as though the book is sick of "the fussy accompaniment of that consciousness," that "idle parasite on the grand sequence of things," and so drops its characters and its conceit. Collective history marches past the obsessions and partialities of individuals.

The high artifice of the character studies in *Theophrastus Such* represents a break with the practice of typology that had underwritten the attempt to identify one's ethical horizons with one's sociohistorical situation. In *Middlemarch*, typology serves a dual purpose of allowing for detached commentary on one's contemporaries while simultaneously reinforcing the belief that one does have a role within a larger history. There, the detachment provided by typology is therapeutic: it provides relief to support a deeper accession to one's sociohistorical situation. In *Theophrastus*, the construction of types doesn't work to reaffirm the larger continuities of history; indeed, the very

signature of detachment is the practice of giving outlandishly anachronistic names to both its subjects and its supposed author. Though the details of their lives leave little doubt that they are products of Victorian Britain, their introduction as Mixtus and Merman, Lentulus and Touchwood, Mordax and Ganymede, Vorticella and Sir Gavial Mantrap emphasize that these are fictions detached from historical reality.

In “So Young!” for example, we learn about how a “girlishly handsome precocious youth” named Ganymede is habituated to viewing himself as “very young and very interesting” by circumstances ranging from being the “youngest darling” of his family to having an early initiation into authorship (92). Ganymede continues to look young in what Theophrastus calls his “Antinoüs period,” during which he marries an older woman; in the years that follow, remarks about his youthfulness persist in reviews of his work by lazy critics, so he manages to cling to that self-perception long after he can credibly lay claim to it (93-5). Theophrastus remarks, “He was only undergoing one form of a common moral disease: being strongly mirrored for himself in the remark of others, he was getting to see his real characteristics as a dramatic part, a type to which his doings were always in correspondence” (93). This sort of interjection is familiar from Eliot’s novels, but the narrative on which it comments is different: it is a distinctly contrived fable associating pederasty with arrested development and theatricality, or vice versa, a fable built less by following out the plausible implications of events than by stringing together givens and coincidences into a narrative that displaces its queer subject matter to the name Ganymede and a reference to Antinoüs. There’s no suggestion that the psychological dynamics that interest Eliot are present in the mythic Ganymede or the historical Antinoüs, but these associations transform the story, not only because they

signal the queer subtext, but because they imbue her study with an air of artifice that makes it both discrete and discreet. *Theophrastus Such* produces something like an inverse of typology: rather than reaching through history to find a commonality between two real persons, Eliot's use of coincidences and loud anachronisms recasts these psychological studies as tales. While there are fantastical coincidences and even the occasional silly name in Eliot's novels, in *Theophrastus*, they are the frame, the magic casement, through which we see the story.

In the arc of Eliot's career, *Theophrastus* tends to be seen as either a declension or an oddity, but if it were isolated in a juxtaposition with the overheated atmosphere of *Daniel Deronda*, it could also be seen as an attempt to find a cooler, less coercive form of coexistence by embracing the artifice that underlies appeals to historical types.<sup>37</sup> Where *Deronda* troubles the feeling of detachment that one can simulate through typology by bringing typology into the present, *Theophrastus* finds that detachment in the process of recasting typological thinking in and as artifice. *Theophrastus* doesn't rely on his subjects as guides to his relationship with the wider world, and while anatomizing the causes of all of their flaws, he finds an excuse for everything: the result is pervasively judgmental, but the ostentatiously fictive quality of the studies disclaim the confrontations and exposures and reckonings that normally follow from the act of judgment. Less is expected of the good life, and less is demanded. Crucially the sacrifice and the dignity of seeing oneself as historically situated has fallen away. *Theophrastus* represents a suspension of the

---

<sup>37</sup> That knowledge of history relies on the artificial and the artifactual is an insight that Walter Pater will explore at a high level of complexity. For a sophisticated theory of the interplay between historicism and aestheticism in Pater, see Carolyn Williams's *Transfigured World*.

ethical project that has anchored Eliot's novels, the attempt to use sympathy to find an individuating vocation in relation to one's sociohistorical situation.

Several authors of the next generation, confronting similar intellectual currents and social conditions make a final break with the orientation towards collective history that had defined the reflexive virtues of Carlyle, Barrett Browning, and Eliot. It is a break suggested, however awkwardly, by Theophrastus's bemused tolerance that combines sociability and withdrawal under the aegis of a specifically aestheticized anachronism, as well as his drive to pursue a regimen of psychological sophistication without giving a practical end to it. For Pater and Wilde, the ideal of reflexivity will be to bring a fragmented view of history into an active relationship to the development of one's psychology.

#### 4.1: Walter Pater's Self-Culture

Walter Pater makes a Copernican Revolution in Victorian thinking about the moral psychology of historicism. Rather than adapting one's psychology to fit a definite role appropriate to one's historical situation, Pater's project of self-culture uses a process of configuration to adapt different aspects of history to facilitate one's psychological development. Thomas Carlyle had attempted to give an account of how a person could find a binding vocation by recognizing the lineaments of their current situation, and thus recognize how they should conform their psychology to the unique demands of their historical situation. At the outset of his career, Pater coined the term "diaphaneité" as an idealization of the integration of psychology and historical circumstance, a perfected responsiveness to one's situation. He ultimately abandoned this ideal of a perfect integration with one's moment in favor of the more heavily mediated, untimelier ideal of self-culture. In theorizing self-culture, Pater effects an inversion in the theorization of reflexive virtue: he is still interested in finding a felicitous relationship between self and situation, but he plans to achieve it not by expecting the individual to fulfill the demands of definite situations in the world, but rather by fragmenting history in order to engage different ways of being in the world through configuration with a series of exceptional individuals who display various virtues. The aim of this procession of imaginative relationships is to make the individual so well-balanced, so broadly sensitive, that he will have achieved the most fully and subtly variable relationship to the world in general.

In the process of emphasizing how starkly Pater departed from earlier ideas about the moral psychology appropriate to historicism, I also hope to draw out the exacting, self-disciplining quality of self-culture. In recent years, there has been more attention to

Pater as an ethical thinker. Such an approach not only departs with the tradition of reading him as an amoralist, which dates back to the controversy surrounding the publication of *The Renaissance*, but also moves past a tradition of viewing Pater's later writing as a retreat into more conventionally moral positions.<sup>1</sup> These revisions have drawn out Pater's transvaluation of earlier values. Matthew Sussman, for example, traces a tradition of thinking about virtues of style through works by John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and Walter Pater. In the framework of virtue, a person's style can be viewed as the enactment of a disposition. For Sussman, Pater is an ethical thinker whose approach shifts to "privilege ways of thinking and feeling, which are reflective and volitional, over outcomes and results."<sup>2</sup> In a similar spirit, Thomas Albrecht argues that Pater augments a "more orthodox [...] insistence on the moral value of human sympathy" with an emphasis on "a necessary unpredictability and uncertainty, a necessary singularity and freedom, of human ethical responses" as the very essence of the ethical.<sup>3</sup> Without disagreeing with these conclusions, I want to place more emphasis on the torsion involved in bringing about these realignments in moral psychology.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, my

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Albrecht gives a thorough overview of both critical traditions, the accusations of a fundamental "moral irresponsibility" on the one hand, and the "retreat hypothesis," on the other, which makes a division between morally constrained later works and amoral early ones. Thomas Albrecht, "'That Free Play of Human Affection': The Humanist Ethics of Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*," *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 73:4, 487-9.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Sussman, "Stylistic Virtue in Nineteenth-Century Criticism," *Victorian Studies*, 56:2, 244, 242

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Albrecht, "'That Free Play of Human Affection': The Humanist Ethics of Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*," *Nineteenth Century Literature* (73:4), 491.

<sup>4</sup> Sebastian Lecourt gives an account of the disciplinary, sacrificial dimensions of Pater's work, especially in *Marius the Epicurean*, with reference to nineteenth-century discourses around conversion and secularism. His claim that "the ethos of many-sidedness curiously replicates the logic of *askesis*" resonates with my argument. Sebastian Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief: Victorian Anthropology, Liberal Aesthetics, and the Secular Imagination* (NYC: Oxford, 2018), 132.

approach will have more in common with readings of Pater as a moral perfectionist by Andrew Miller and David Russell.<sup>5</sup>

### From Diaphaneitè to Self-Culture

The distinctiveness of self-culture as an ethical project will fall into relief after a brief consideration of his most Carlylean essay, “Diaphaneitè,” which pushes the prospect of finding a felicitous relationship between oneself and one’s situation into such heights of idealization that it becomes impossible to imagine deliberately achieving it. Though Pater tries to elucidate the capacity to exist in a state of total responsiveness to one’s situation, a kind of instant and persistent impersonality, he is tellingly incapable of giving a causal account of this condition. “Diaphaneitè” is a neologism derived from the word diaphanous, and it refers to a capacity to respond spontaneously to one’s situation.<sup>6</sup> Such an aspiration towards a pure responsiveness is predicated on the historicist idea that the ethical prospects of distinct moments and situations are substantively different from each other. Yet because the essay attempts to treat diaphaneitè as a unified, ideal condition, Pater refuses to describe a process in which one might cultivate it by degrees. You either have it or you don’t. Instead of giving a causal account of diaphaneitè, he gives causal accounts of other distinctive character types, and describes the difference: a person with diaphaneitè possesses “by a happy gift of nature, without any struggle at all” the sort of simplicity that Savonarola struggles towards unsuccessfully in *Romola*; it isn’t

---

<sup>5</sup> Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay form in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> David Russell, with the classicist Richard Hutchins, helpfully characterizes it as “a perfectionist injunction, likely in the second person plural future, functioning as an imperative.” David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay form in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2018), 118, 183n.39.

like the “sterile kind of culture” called “taste,” and it isn’t like the accumulated insights of the intellect, but rather it manages to access profound insights with the effortlessness of taste, and so automatically that it gives the impression of a reincarnated soul, reflecting on its inborn knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In a style suggestive of mysticism, Pater approaches the ideal through negatives and indirection, demonstrating its grandeur by describing the difficulty of attaining it.

This challenging essay was never prepared for publication, but we learn enough about diaphaneité to suspect that its ambiguities are an inevitable product of the elusive ideal that it attempts to define. The word diaphaneité is derived from a word for translucency, and it refers to a level of receptivity so effortless that it might better be called susceptibility. Indeed, at one point, he describes it as “a kind of impotence, an ineffectual wholeness of nature, yet with a divine beauty and significance of its own.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, it becomes hard to say in what sense a properly diaphanous person takes any actions at all, because they seem to be so integrated to their situation. “It is the spirit that sees external circumstances as they are, its own power and tendencies as they are, and realizes the given conditions of its life, not disquieted by the desire for change, or the preference of one part in life rather than another.”<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of this sentence, we learn that diaphaneité let’s someone perfectly measure both their own capacities and their outward situation, but this sizing-up isn’t the prelude to a struggle between self and circumstance. On the contrary, there is no need for a confrontation between the two,

---

<sup>7</sup> Walter Pater. “Diaphaneité.” *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. NYC: Oxford World’s Classics, 2010. 136-8.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Pater. “Diaphaneité.” *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. NYC: Oxford World’s Classics, 2010. 139.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 136-7.

because the thing that diaphaneité realizes is “the given conditions of its life.” If “realizes” means achieves, as it seems to, then diaphaneité allows someone to be the cause of his or her own conditions; if it means understands, then action is suddenly displaced by the passive experience of self-knowledge. Either way, the person with diaphaneité recognizes his or her own power only to immediately lose any need to use it. They already are whatever they need to be. Pater presents diaphaneité as a quality that cannot be cultivated, but a person who possesses it becomes so perfectly integrated with her situation that it becomes difficult to represent diaphaneité as having either a history or prospects.

By imagining a perfect responsiveness to circumstance, Pater suggests the way that attempts to consciously adjust oneself to a situation always leave one out of sync with that situation. At the essay’s end, Pater says, “A majority of such would be the regeneration of the world.” It would be a mistake to interpret this claim as utopian, because the diaphanous person lives and behaves in ways that cannot be anticipated or organized. This final claim doesn’t suggest a program, so much as Pater’s own aspiration towards the state that he describes, his desire to abandon himself to this recklessly unspecific wish. Yet “Diaphaneité” itself is labored and abstract, far more of a frustrated struggle after simplicity than simplicity, as such.

In an earlier chapter, we saw how Carlyle defined sincerity as the ability to recognize a binding vocation in the lineaments of one’s situation. Carlyle is the only author referenced twice in “Diaphaneité,” and the essay gives the impression of his “sincerity” crystallized into an unapproachable, nearly indescribable perfection, a quality that can be admired in a few ludicrously disparate examples (Dante’s Beatrice, Raphael,

and Charlotte Corday), but never imitated.<sup>10</sup> Carlyle had always struggled to connect his laudatory depictions of sincere heroes with a lived-in sense of how a person might cultivate his ideal of sincerity. In “Diaphaneitè,” the dream of being perfectly integrated to one’s situation becomes “an accident of birth,” something “in the order of grace.” In the process, of describing what diaphaneitè is not, Pater begins to describe the minute adjustments by which people try to integrate their psychology to their situations. The compensations that result may lack the grace of diaphaneitè, but at least it remains possible to give an account of how they operate.

In an interesting recent treatment of Pater as an ethical thinker, David Russell gives “Diaphaneitè” a programmatic position in Pater’s career. Russell’s project shows how the essay form developed tact as an ethics and aesthetics of handling people and ideas; he draws out Pater’s perfectionism, noting that “Pater frames and reframes the conditions of tactful relief as a practice of approach to the world. The rigor of trust is not only in the task of finding it, but in giving up one’s prior trust in one’s self, in what one is, or thought one was.”<sup>11</sup> Russell is right that the dynamics of reception that Pater explores in “Diaphaneitè” dramatize the ethical stakes of his project, which continues to encourage the process of making oneself susceptible to transformation under the influence of other people. But there are shortcomings to Russell’s programmatic reading of “Diaphaneitè.” In the first place, it smooths over some of the ironies of the essay itself. While some of its descriptive language returns elsewhere in Pater’s writing, its examples

---

<sup>10</sup> It is also worth noting that all three are effectively literary characters: it is explicitly Carlyle’s Charlotte Corday and evidently Giorgio Vasari’s Raphael that Pater is hearkening after—I owe the latter observation to Noah Yoder.

<sup>11</sup> David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay form in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2018), 125

sit uneasily with the qualities that Russell celebrates. Russell is right to note that a homophobic tradition of Pater criticism “originates in the scandal of a deeply penetrable man,” but one of only three examples of diaphaneité is Charlotte Corday, drawn from Carlyle’s titillated account of her stabbing Marat in his bathtub.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, receptivity isn’t the whole story, even in this short essay. Moreover, the essay makes a state of perfect receptivity seem unapproachable. Part of what makes “Diaphaneité” so exquisite and so difficult to parse is that it has the quality of an intellectual daydream. It registers the erotic undercurrents in historicist thinking, and then it simultaneously enjoys those fantasies of having an ecstatic union with history while suggesting something of their impossibility.

In the second place, Russell singles-out “Diaphaneité” (1864) as a manifesto for Pater’s ethical thinking, even though Pater makes substantial revisions to his perfectionism in his essay on the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1866), the first piece of the project that would become *The Renaissance*. Russell characterizes “Diaphaneité” as “a near oxymoron, a manifesto for latency.” When he notes that Pater has reused language from “Diaphaneité” in the essay on Winckelmann, he says, “It comes at the end of *The Renaissance* in fulfillment of Pater’s early manifesto.” Yet Pater’s position had significantly changed in between the two essays, as I hope to show.

We get a more stringent sense of the handling and manipulation that goes into being receptive if we attend to the theory of self-culture that he expresses in “Winckelmann.” Self-culture allows for a more piecemeal process of development than

---

<sup>12</sup> Russell 115, 138.

diaphaneitè had. The mechanism of self-culture is configuration, a series of imaginative relationships with people who exemplify various virtues. Self-culture is an attempt to recognize the strength of one's intellect in "various forms of genius." To do so, "it must see into the laws, the operation, the intellectual reward of every divided form of culture; but only that it may measure the relation between itself and them."<sup>13</sup> Divided forms of culture are those that develop one disposition too strongly at the expense of others—what Pater refers to elsewhere in the essay as Winckelmann's "narrow perfection: his feverish nursing of the one motive of his life" (147). According to Pater, the path to culture is a passionate but analytic encounter with such praiseworthy individuals—recognizing virtues in other people and attempting to reconstruct the rules by which they operate. By taking such a reflexive approach to virtues, self-culture ensures that no particular disposition will predominate in a person's life for too long: the intellect "struggles with those forms till its secret is won from each, and then lets each fall back into its place" (183). This sets an endpoint for the development of any given disposition: once you understand it, you stop cultivating it. Rather than adjusting one's psychology to the demands of an historical situation, one develops and balances different aspects of one's psychology by a passionate analysis of the psychologies of individuals from various historical moments.

Self-culture isn't ultimately modeled on a particular person but a particular way of relating to other people. Though Pater presents Goethe as the exemplar of self-culture, he actually theorizes it through a description of Goethe's imaginative relationship with

---

<sup>13</sup> Walter Pater. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1980, 183. All subsequent citations to *The Renaissance* will be parenthetical.

Winckelmann, rather than through a discussion of his life or works.<sup>14</sup> Near the end of the essay, Pater says that “The aim of a right criticism is to place Winckelmann in an intellectual perspective, of which Goethe is the foreground,” yet Pater’s last-minute claim that Winckelmann is “infinitely less than Goethe” belies the fact that his essay has spent the vast majority of its attention on its supposed background, Winckelmann (181). Pater only gives one concrete illustration from Goethe’s life or works, the “Confessions of a Beautiful Soul” from *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*.<sup>15</sup> That narrative is a compelling demonstration of the way that a particular virtue can narrow and burden someone’s development, but it’s notable that Pater illustrates Goethe’s self-culture by referring to a cautionary example in his fiction, rather than with examples from his life, other than his imaginative relationship with Winckelmann. Pater’s silence on other aspects of Goethe’s life displaces a description of the incidental stations of his development in favor of deriving a mode of relating to other people.

---

<sup>14</sup> The two were correspondents, but Winckelmann was murdered on his way to their first meeting while Goethe was still a young man.

<sup>15</sup> Pater’s account of self-culture does echo specific passages in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, so it’s interesting that he doesn’t draw on it further, yet he had reason to disentangle his own project from that particular illustration. There are passages that recommend a refinement and balancing of one’s existing virtues in pursuit of wholeness: “One force controls another, but none can create another. In every predisposition, and only there, lies the power to perfect itself” and “What I find most difficult is the separation a man must achieve within and for himself if he is ever to attain self-cultivation. That is why we encounter so many one-sided cultures, each of which presumes to speak for all.” These are both remarks by the Abbé, the leader of the Tower Society, the aristocratic secret society that certifies Wilhelm Meister’s apprenticeship and has surreptitiously influenced the course of his development. This aristocratic context suggests one of the ways in which Goethe is an idiosyncratic, even difficult, model. As the last major European writer who was also a courtier, the “wholeness” of his career may prove impossible to replicate for later individuals. The project of self-culture reconstructs certain aristocratic values outside of the practical conditions in which they were initially celebrated, particularly the ease and equipoise of *sprezzatura* and a preference for generalism over specialization. Pater, writing in a bourgeois milieu, relies on self-reflexivity to imaginatively reconstruct an experiential context in which these qualities are possible. Yet his project isn’t a throwback: as felicitous effects of self-culture, generalism, ease, and equipoise are supposed to enable a person to experience a more active and variously pleasing relationship with modern life’s “conflicting claims, its entangled interests” (182). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. Trans. Eric A Blackall. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989. 338; 351.

Self-culture is open-ended, but its open-endedness depends on pursuing a specific and limited kind of relationship, which is defined by its inevitable closure and asymmetry. Andrew Miller proposes that Pater is inviting us to enter into the same sort of imaginative relationship with him as the one that he describes between Goethe and Winckelmann.<sup>16</sup> Yet there is a categorical difference between Goethe, who Pater takes as the exemplar of self-culture, and Winckelmann, who represents what Pater describes as a narrower perfection. The open-endedness of self-culture depends on the formal structures of the configuration by which it develops. The person of self-culture is a lover of strange souls: if we learn how to take a speculative attitude towards ourselves by speculating about others, it is also the case that we attain to a self-estranging impersonality by estranging ourselves from a series of appealing and admirable individuals. The open-endedness of Pater's self-culture requires that we discipline our relationships with other people. Put another way, self-culture creates a parallax: you perceive shifts in yourself by judging those motions against the fixed point provided by looking at the examples of other people. Speculating about others teaches us how to have a speculative attitude towards ourselves, but it tends to turn those people into fixed points.

Self-culture is recommended as the form of perfection most appropriate to the modern world, not so much as a norm, but as the most fully and reliably rewarding disposition. Pater's theory of reflexive virtue is uncommonly magnanimous: he insists at multiple points that there are many ways for a person to achieve a type of perfection relative to their particular motives and temperament (147, 150, 152). This generous spirit throws into relief the stringencies of self-culture, because it's particular mode of self-

---

<sup>16</sup> Miller 16-9.

discipline always comes as a falling away from the joyful recognition of some alluring other. Pater is converting skepticism into relationships—but these are strange and fleeting relationships, because self-culture makes them into the passing epochs of an individuality that only evolves by abandonment.

### Representing Self-Culture

Self-culture, by its very nature, proves difficult to directly represent, which means that Pater's advocacy for it will depend on his strategies for perceiving and representing the virtues of people who have obtained a narrow perfection. The distinction between the reflexive virtue of self-culture and the virtues that it finds through configuration with other people manifests in the different narrative strategies that Pater uses to represent the process of self-culture and the virtues that one might perceive in others.

Though Pater doesn't give a substantive depiction of Goethe—his exemplar of the wholeness and balance to be achieved through self-culture—the unique style and narrative form of *Marius the Epicurean* represent an attempt to demonstrate how a person might develop such wholeness and balance by responding to the virtues of other people. Marius comes of age during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and the novel tracks his development as he reacts to a series of remarkable individuals and experiences. These encounters, especially with other people, lead Marius to develop various dispositions. Yet Marius doesn't undergo this process with the level of self-reflexivity that Pater describes in his essay on Winckelmann. Pater does note certain “modernisms,” in Marius's behavior, like keeping a “register of the movements of his own private thoughts,” that he justifies by tracing them to the Stoics, but, on Pater's view, Marius exists in a time before

the strong sense of history and interiority that produce self-reflexivity.<sup>17</sup> Though Marius frequently reflects on the virtues of the people he admires, and though he's aware of his own development, his progress is driven by the accidents of his existence, the people he happens to meet, the places he happens to be.<sup>18</sup> It is as if Marius has to undergo the abrupt separation that befell Goethe and Winckelmann over and over again.

While the narrative structure of *Marius* forces its protagonist to remain constantly open to new influences, the novel's style maintains an impersonal remove between Marius, because it is Marius's relationships to other people that models the process of culture, rather than Marius himself. Though Marius's thoughts and feelings are rendered with unrelenting intimacy and intricacy, his actions and conversations are presented at a remove or not at all, ensuring that there's almost nothing concrete about Marius to take as a model. Indeed, Stephen Arata makes the astonishing observation that Marius has only one line of recorded dialogue in the entire novel.<sup>19</sup> Arata gives a compelling account of the "impersonal intimacy" with which we apprehend Marius. He begins by noting that Marius's death doesn't elicit the pathos that one might expect at the demise of such an elaborately drawn character. Where other novels attempt to simulate the kind of sympathy that one might feel for a real person, Marius is presented more as a "heuristic,"

---

<sup>17</sup> Walter Pater. *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Macmillan and Co., 1885. 405.

<sup>18</sup> A partial list of such accidents: the early demise of his friend Flavian in a plague (118-25); his dissatisfaction with Marcus Aurelius's philosophy is crystalized by seeing him watch a gruesome gladiatorial match with cultivated indifference (237); a speech by the philosopher Cornelius Fronto is conveniently cut short by a crowd of revelers, so that Marius can follow it with what the next chapter-title calls "Second Thoughts" (251; 253); he gets to meet "the poetic ideal of his boyhood," Apuleius, at a dinner party and hear him give an idiosyncratic interpretation of Platonism (316; 326-9). On a less personal scale, the narration emphasizes how contingent it is that he encounters Christianity during one of its more accommodating, less stringent phases (358).

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Arata. "The Impersonal Intimacy of *Marius the Epicurean*." *The Feeling of Reading*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2010. 134.

a demonstration of certain “forms of life.”<sup>20</sup> Oscar Wilde complained of Marius’s passivity in the novel, but this isn’t an accidental defect.<sup>21</sup> The novel rigorously *withholds* a depiction of Marius as an actor.

Yet Arata errs in generalizing this to the rest of Pater’s work. *Marius* may not elicit pathos, but a reader of “The Child in the House” is likely to feel, vicariously, the tenderness in the child’s impressions, and the chagrin of his sudden homesickness; indeed, each of Pater’s short fiction pieces, his *Imaginary Portraits*, finds something poignant in its subject. Acknowledging this emotional range reinforces the significance of Arata’s observations about *Marius*. The fact that Pater was able to elicit pathos elsewhere in his fiction suggests that the unique impersonality of *Marius* was deliberately contrived, and not the result of inability. *Marius* stands alone among Pater’s works of fiction because of the distinct challenges of depicting the open-ended development of culture, a reflexive virtue that results in different sorts of behavior and relationships depending upon the situation that it responds to in a person’s life.

### The Discipline of Historicism

Pater’s conception of self-culture responds to ethical skepticism by developing strategies for evaluating and analyzing the virtues of other people in order to cultivate and balance various narrower virtues. That skepticism is produced by Pater’s thinking about history and psychology, which attunes him to the contingency of our behavior and its significance, while the project of self-culture incorporates a recognition of immanent causal conditions into its methods for apprehending the virtues of other people, making

---

<sup>20</sup> Arata 131-3; 138; 146.

<sup>21</sup> Oscar Wilde. “De Profundis.” *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. NYC: Harper Perennial, 2008. 922.

that contingency into the individuating condition for recognizing an ethical prospect as uniquely relevant to oneself.

Indeed, Pater uses the homology between causal accounts of history and of psychology to set the fundamentally retrospective horizon of self-culture. We have seen how the open-endedness of this reflexive virtue relies on a closed structure, a specific kind of configuration: feel an affinity for someone, attempt to reconstruct their exceptional virtue passionately, but also analytically, in order to cultivate that aspect of your own nature, and then transfer your affections to someone else once you've succeeded. It is structured by another form of closure, too, the constant loss enforced by the forward march of time. As Carolyn Williams has shown, Pater intertwines aestheticism with historicism by making aesthetic judgment a self-historicizing process. The aesthetic position relates to an art object or another person not as a matter of personal caprice or immediacy, but rather through "the federating power of memory [...]. In the mobility of these re-creative self-divisions, both object and self are correlatively reconstituted as distinct and whole—but in the past and as the past."<sup>22</sup> For Pater, the aesthetic attitude isn't satisfied with subjective experience until it can take that experience as an object in its own right. Crucially, the highest, most precise and attentive mode of experience is self-historicizing—to take a speculative and estranging attitude towards others teaches us to take a speculative and estranging attitude towards ourselves, because in both cases the process works by way of reconstructing psychological states that have ceased and departed.

---

<sup>22</sup> Carolyn Williams. *Transfigured World*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989. 36.

Pater's retrospective orientation enables his project of self-culture to accommodate a wide range of affinities, but this open-endedness relies on emphasizing the ways that individuals are never entirely synchronized with their historical circumstances—in contrast to the minutely realized integration imagined in “Diaphaneité.” In the “Preface,” Pater says that “the various forms of intellectual activity which together make up the culture of an age, move for the most part from different starting-points, and by unconnected roads.” It is natural enough to observe that different intellectual tendencies have “different starting-points,” but the assertion that they “move for the most part [...] by unconnected roads” is a more profound claim about the difficulties of synthesizing the elements of historical development. While he adds, shortly after this, that the Renaissance was a period of general unity, the model for this “complete type of general culture” is one of nearness, rather than total unification: “Here, artists and philosophers and those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen, do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air, and catch a common light and heat from each other's thoughts.” This is a scene of mutuality, but it takes an earlier condition of separateness as granted: it is an era “of more favorable conditions, in which the thoughts of men *draw nearer together than is their wont*,” and he particularly asserts the period owes its dignity to the “intimate alliance with mind, this participation in the best thoughts, which that art produced” (xxiii-xxiv, emphasis added). As a vision of the happiest relationship between individuals and their historical circumstances, this is a much more modest, much more qualified aspiration than the one expressed in “Diaphaneité.” This kind of cultural convergence is a state of interaction achieved by separate minds or groups that can reflect back upon the society that produced it, but that

is premised on the idea that substantive disconnections exist among even the most exceptionally compatible contemporaries.

Because Pater conceives of history as moving by unconnected roads, his subjects are never so much taken up as representatives of their ages as they are disclosed as representatives of certain dispositions, thrown into relief by their strained relationship with their historical situations. Arata, as we have seen, claims that all of Pater's subjects, fictional and otherwise, are presented with the same sort of impersonality that he generated in *Marius the Epicurean*, and he quotes a sentence from the "Preface" of *The Renaissance* to suggest that each of that book's subjects is meant to be an exemplar of his historical moment: "[the critic asks] in whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself" (xxi).<sup>23</sup> This citation is misleading. In context, Pater is arguing that the arts are non-progressive and encouraging his reader to view the productions of different periods relative to their historical situation, but the next sentence shows how little he's interested in making his subjects into mere exemplars of their age. He quotes Blake saying that "The ages are all equal, but genius is always above its age" (xxi). Arata goes further, claiming that "Individual figures are quickly typified, absorbed into the abstract categories that make historical analysis possible" and that "the essays in *The Renaissance* gesture toward the specificity of an individual's lived experience only to put that specificity aside as irrelevant to the historian's larger purposes."<sup>24</sup> This is a false opposition. It assumes that the sorts of historical forms that Pater is interested in are obscured or confused by individual examples, as if Pater were attempting the level of

---

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Arata 142.

<sup>24</sup> Arata 142.

abstraction that he criticizes in Hegel and Comte (189). But Pater's view of history isn't so rigidly stadial.

I dwell on this because Pater is specifically invested in individuals who are out of sync with their historical circumstances, and the way that this specificity and untimeliness can throw their virtues into sharper relief. He describes how Goethe found a conception of Hellenic repose through the example of Winckelmann, "as in a fragment of Greek art itself, stranded on that littered, indeterminate shore of Germany in the eighteenth century. In Winckelmann, this type comes to him, not as in a book or a theory, but more importunately, because in a passionate life, in a personality" (182). "Importunately" captures the significant role that untimely individuals have for Pater's thinking about virtue: it suggests the persistent, pressing challenge that they present to the imagination of those people who look back on them, and their capacity to hamper and narrow a person's development. The poignant tension between individual psychology and historical situation deepens Pater's sympathy for the strange souls that he takes as his subjects, even as the basically retrospective horizon of his project guards against overinvestment.

His essay on Pico della Mirandola exemplifies his commitment to preserving the untimeliness and idiosyncrasy of his subject, often in terms of the melancholy and limitation of their position. It dwells with Pico's failed attempt to create a grand synthesis between Christianity and the thinkers of Pagan antiquity, rather than the more abstracting modes of historicism that it prefigures. Early in the essay, Pater proposes that the Renaissance was "great rather by what it designed than by what it achieved," and that many of its aims were only realized in the Enlightenment or after. Pico had attempted to

unite the beliefs of the pagan world with those of Christianity in a great system of correspondences and allegorical meanings, where “a modern scholar occupied by this problem might observe that all religions may be regarded as natural products, that, at least in their origin, their growth, their decay, they have common laws.” Pater then goes on to imagine that such a modern scholar would historicize each religious system and, at last, “the basis of the reconciliation of the religions of the world would thus be the inexhaustible activity and creativeness of the human mind itself” (25-6). This resembles Pater’s methods in its naturalizing impulse, but with a simplicity and abstraction that he never attempts to achieve. Such an approach would resolve historical differences by positing certain psychological laws as the sole driving force of historical development. Yet the irony and the poignancy of Pico’s life is that his own example would undermine the value of this lately discovered continuity among all religions, because his psychology was shaped and revealed by living with the *tension* between these two traditions with their separate histories. Pico may share an aspiration to unite Pagan and Christian with the disenchanted modern scholar, but he lived with the anxious desire to find some credulous reconciliation between them. Pater tells us that “the enduring interest of his story” lies in the fact that “even after his conversion, [he never] forgot the old gods. He is one of the last who seriously and sincerely entertained the claim on men’s faith of the pagan religions” (33). It is by Pico’s very idiosyncrasy, his bizarre juxtapositions, that a reconciliation among traditions of devotion occurs, not as part of a divine unity, not as different elements in a naturalist history, not as the steps in a progress, but as the passions that befall a single person and force a particular disposition to come into focus. It is by

such happenstances in human lives that the open-endedness of Pater's view of history has its corresponding closure.

Yet the closure is evidently difficult. In depicting the peculiar virtues of various exceptional individuals, Pater often seems haunted by his subjects, even characterizing them as undead. Pater was obsessed with an anecdote from Heinrich Heine about the Pagan gods returning in the Christian middle ages: he retells it at three points in *The Renaissance* (19; 24-5; 93), and two of his later stories, "Denys L'Auxeroix" and "Apollo in Picardy" are adaptations of it. Yet the gods become more ghoulish in successive retellings, less eternal and more undead. These things are a parable of the dangerous allure of past ideas. In the two central essays of *The Renaissance*, he describes the Mona Lisa as a vampire and the aging Michelangelo as a *revenant*. In both cases, their undead state reflects their frightening untimeliness.

The haunting is especially powerful in his essay on "The Poetry of Michelangelo." At the end of the essay, he claims that Michelangelo's work is defined by a "strange interfusion of sweetness and strength." Having identified the defining virtue behind Michelangelo's work, he observes that it is subsequently achieved by artists like William Blake and Victor Hugo "who, though not of his school, and unaware, are his true sons, and help us to understand him, as he in turn interprets and justifies them." He concludes, startlingly enough, by adding, "Perhaps this is the chief use in studying old masters" (76). As a justification, this fits within his project of self-culture, because it concerns itself with finding the characteristic virtue of an exceptional individual by throwing his idiosyncrasy into stark historical relief. Yet this positive piece of knowledge is unequal to the troubling spectacle that Pater presents of Michelangelo's melancholy old

age. As he concludes a passage that characterizes Michelangelo as a *revenant* dreaming of a distant ideal, the pain of deferral is incorporated into the description. Before telling us what the ideal is, Pater interposes several sentences, and the sentence that does finally introduce the ideal creates a huge interval between Michelangelo's "dreaming" and a description of the substance of his dream, which is "on the morning of the world's history, on the primitive form of man, on the images under which that primitive world had conceived of spiritual forces." Within that gap between the dreaming and its ideal, Pater interjects his repeated accusation that the culture of the Counter-Reformation was "theatrical" and "worn-out" (70-1). In describing the experiences that caused the *revenant* Michelangelo to float above his society, Pater takes on the tiresome frustrations and disappointments that separated Michelangelo from his happiness. Pater is haunted by this strange soul, and he struggles to stand apart from its despondency.

To say that history "moves by unconnected roads" suggests a sprawling multiplicity, a liberating abundance—such a view of history has certainly underpinned the liberatory aspirations of many a critic. But this image from Pater's Preface has its compliment in a more sorrowful one from his Conclusion. "Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening" (189). History may seem to sprawl out in every direction, but individuals can only channel their energies this way or that. Pater's self-culture sees the "tragic" in the "brilliancy" of other people, because it recognizes that every way of being in the world exists by the loss of that multiplicity. Even the project of self-culture, the attempt to recognize and balance the widest range of virtues, takes on a desperate

character in this quote: a compulsion to make a new discrimination every moment during a short day in which even the light is refracted through the cold, diaphanous frost. It makes a chilly compliment to the more famous aspiration that begins the paragraph, “to burn always with a hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (189). Pater’s project is keyed to the range of affinities that a modern person might feel with people from radically different historical situations. In this sense, a person pursuing the reflexive virtue of self-culture sees himself as dependent upon a certain sort of community, but one that can only be reconstructed retrospectively by noticing the affinities among fundamentally disconnected people.

#### 4.2: Oscar Wilde's Critical Spirit

Most of Pater's criticism was written in the form of appreciations, essays analyzing and celebrating particular individuals. Outside of his journalistic criticism, Wilde only published one essay in this mode, "Pen, Pencil and Poison," dedicated to the art critic and serial killer Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. It elegantly captures Wilde's departures from Pater.<sup>25</sup>

Not only does Wilde attribute certain critical ideas associated with Pater to Wainewright, as Stephen Calloway notes, but he also uses Wainewright's example to undermine two of Pater's favorite honorifics: wholeness and completeness.<sup>26</sup> Wilde opens by acknowledging that artists tend to lack these qualities—tend to achieve a narrow perfection in Pater's formulation—but he's happy to report that there are some exceptions, who are able to cultivate and balance multiple capacities in themselves. His list begins with Rubens, who "served as ambassador," and Goethe, the hero of Pater's project of self-culture, as well as Milton and Sophocles. But it proceeds through a few more discouraging models of wholeness: American writers who "seem to desire nothing better than to become the diplomatic representatives of their country" and "Wainewright, the subject of this brief memoir," who balanced out his varied achievements in the arts with an impressive career as a forger and "a subtle and secret poisoner almost without rival in this or any age" (993). Wilde is suggesting that wholeness might include cruelty. Furthermore—and more damaging to the spirit of Pater's conception of completeness—the fact that Wainewright incorporates his murders among the rest of his endeavors with

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf Oscar Wilde. "Pen, Pencil, and Poison." *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*. NYC: Harper Perennial, 2008. 995-6. All subsequent citations of Wilde's work will be parenthetical to this volume.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Calloway. "Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses." *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. NYC: Cambridge UP, 2006.

such deliberate balance doesn't prevent this aspect of his career from leading him into grotesque caprices that limit the rest of his life. Even in his prisoner's exile in Australia, he makes time for art, conversation, and murder, though his life has careened into mediocrity and stultifying obscurity. He stands as a mockery of the serene balance that Pater celebrates and performs.

Wilde's essay on Wainewright still testifies to the value of configuration, but on a different basis. The attempt to reconstruct some admirably incomprehensible other can act as a mechanism for realizing one's own capacities. In Wilde's attempts to understand this peculiar killer and critic, he conveys the impression that analysis becomes a form of creativity when it is faced with a sufficiently unresolvable problem. Speculating about the motive for a particular murder, Wilde says, "It may have been for a caprice, or to quicken some hideous sense of power that was in him, or because she suspected something, or for no reason" (1003). That last, table-sweeping possibility suggests the extent to which Wainewright persists as a fascinating, unsolvable puzzle. It is for this reason that Wainewright is no less valuable to a certain form of self-development than the narrowly perfect people that Pater had dwelled upon. Though Wainewright's crimes are too recent to make for an entirely satisfying object of contemplation, Wilde insists that it will be increasingly easy to convert him into an object of speculation as time passes. Soon, Wainewright will join other fascinating killers from history who are "like the puppets of a play" (1008). Pater, in his appreciations of historical individuals, as well as in his *Imaginary Portraits* about fictional characters adjacent to real historical individuals, thickly describes their relationships to an historical milieu, whereas Wilde sees the

greatest value for Wainewright as a puppet, a portable character, a shorthand for a fascinating aberration.

Wilde, like Pater, has an ethical project that attempts to incorporate and master the sorts of causal accounts that lead to ethical skepticism by rendering human agency contingent. We have already seen how Pater gave primacy to psychology in the pursuit of a felicitous interconnection between self and history. Wilde goes further in unmooring the individual from social bonds, theorizing a reflexive virtue, the critical spirit, which entails a continual process of self-estranging self-realization goaded along by attending to the provocation provided by other people.

It may seem perverse to consider Wilde as a theorist of virtue. Wilde's writing is famously characterized by its flippancy, its skepticism, its irony at the expense of conventional morality. To some critics, these qualities are enough to confirm Wilde as a postmodernist or poststructuralist *avant la lettre*, and therefore to remove him from the category of ethicist.<sup>27</sup> But Wilde unmistakably makes strong claims about what a good life entails; moreover, he consistently gives a metaphysical underpinning to those ethical

---

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Dollimore exemplifies this confusion. His Foucauldian account of Wilde in *Sexual Dissidence* is overly schematic, as if Wilde were mechanically flipping an entire series of dichotomies (surfaces vs. depths, change vs. stasis), oppositions that Dollimore forces into alignment by the use of a two-column chart. The results are baffling on their face—why, for example, are surfaces aligned with changefulness, and why are depths aligned with stasis? Such alignments are dubious even within the Foucauldian apparatus: the psychoanalytic conception of repression that Foucault resists works by yoking together depth and dynamism. More deeply, Wilde makes for a poor post-structuralist, because his thinking isn't responding to structuralism: the dyads of his major interlocutors, like Arnold, were inherently historical in their conception, not systems of synchronic differences. Nor does Dollimore provide adequate justification for his simple transvaluations through textual analysis. Instead, he gives a series of Wildean epigrams without commentary, even though some of his examples complicate the oppositions that he's drawing. When Wilde writes, "Only the shallow know themselves," for example, he isn't vindicating shallowness, unless he's also celebrating self-knowledge, and it seems more likely that he's mocking the performance of self-knowledge as a glib routine. A more historically grounded collocation of Wilde and Foucault is developed by Jeff Nunokawa in *Tame Passions of Wilde*. Nunokawa tries to be specific about the changes that are necessary for transposing Foucault's analysis of classical sources into modern contexts. To do so, he appeals to the sociology of George Simmel to explain "a decisive shift in the history of desire itself." Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, (Oxford: Clarendon P: 1991) 14-5. Jeff Nunokawa. *Tame Passions of Wilde*. Princeton, NJ: 2003. 11.

claims, presenting his ethical arguments as necessary implications of his claims about the natural order.

The mode of configuration cultivated in Wilde's writing is radically foreshortened, in contrast to Pater's more extended engagements with his exemplary individuals. Pater's oeuvre is dominated by essays and stories that give protracted consideration to individual historical figures, but Wilde almost never works in this mode. His writing is studded with references to historical, mythical, and fictional personalities, yet these references are characterized by their brusqueness.<sup>28</sup> His most extended considerations of individual figures from history is given to people nearly absent from the historical record, people who he can reconstruct from only a few suggestive details. Wilde's critical spirit is no less dependent on other people than Pater's self-culture, but it's grounded in a different set of psychological claims. Wilde encourages us to primarily identify with our mind's capacity for transformation, and this diminishes the value of the sort of protracted engagements with other people that Pater creates in his essays and stories. To the extent that Wilde casts open-endedness and self-estrangement as goods-in-themselves, these depend upon the closed structuring principle of a certain way of relating to other people: his will to constantly expose the self to disruptions is enabled by the sense that other people can only be known by their effects, as provocations more than as interlocutors.

---

<sup>28</sup> Consider the assessment of Robert Browning given by Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist," a single paragraph that ends by saying "Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose." This is the most extended demonstration of criticism in the whole dialogue. Terse, affectionate, disrespectful—its difference in tone from Pater's appreciations amounts to a difference in type.

Wilde's argument that we should primarily identify with our mind's capacity for transformation depends upon two different sets of claims about the natural order. His skepticism about deliberate actions is presented in the vocabulary of evolutionary biology, while his celebration of the critical spirit relies on an idiosyncratic appeal to Aristotelian biology.<sup>29</sup>

Wilde's skepticism about human agency is decidedly more self-estranging than Pater's. When Pater raises the specter of determinism, it is by remarking that our lives could be reduced to the basic forces and elements of physics or chemistry: necessity is not some "mythological personage without us, with whom we can do warfare," but rather "a magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than the subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world" (*The Renaissance* 185). Pater's materialism leads him to doubt how consistent or deliberate our agency can be, but it gives him no reason to suggest that we're at odds with the elements and forces that make us up. Wilde's materialism is more alienating. Drawing upon the discourse of evolution, he claims that our lives are driven by more or less idiotic animal instincts, working without our knowledge, initiating all of our actions, however deliberated they may seem. In "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert says that "the scientific principle of Heredity" is responsible for "revealing to us the absolute mechanism of all action, and so freeing us from the self-imposed and trammeling burden of moral responsibility." "Heredity" becomes the common origin of our actions, almost the kind of capitalized "mythological personage"

---

<sup>29</sup> For more on Wilde's relationship with evolutionary theory, see Gowan Dawson. *Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability*. NYC: Cambridge UP, 2007.

that Pater dismisses. Wilde turns the material bases of human life into such a single, alienating presence by consolidating just those qualities that we can be said to share with our pre-human ancestors.

Nonetheless, Wilde has his own arguments about the sort of life that a person should aspire to live, and he appeals to a different naturalist discourse to underpin his claims for the value of a reflexive virtue, the critical spirit, which is oriented towards the recognition of one's capacity for transformations rather than towards an attempt to guide that capacity. Wilde believes that it is the essence and aim of life itself to actualize potential, especially where that process of actualization entails a confrontation with what is foreign to the organism. Because this belief is so central to the open-endedness of the critical spirit, I want to belabor its status as a philosophical argument. Throughout his career, even in works that make extensive use of evolutionary theory, Wilde appeals to an idea from Aristotle's *De Anima*, which gives an organicist account of the soul: the soul is that which realizes form from matter, both by transforming foreign matter into its body through eating and by transforming the forms of other entities into thoughts through perception.<sup>30</sup> In other words, it is through an encounter with what is foreign to it that an organism flourishes, both in body and mind. For Wilde, the significance of this parallel between mind and body is that it makes the actualization of potential the essence and aim of life itself. Furthermore, the analogy between actualization in the realm of thought and actualization of the body preserves a categorical difference between the two, with the achievements of thought remaining distinctly human.<sup>31</sup> In "The Critic as Artist," he

---

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle. "De Anima." *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. NYC: Modern Library, 2001. 554-81

<sup>31</sup> This idea, with an attribution to Aristotle, appears in one of his earliest and one of his latest texts. In "De Profundis," his penultimate literary production, he says, "just as the body absorbs things of all kinds, things common and unclean no less than those that the priest or a vision has cleansed, and converts them into

converts that idea into an exhortation: while discussing Aristotle's idea of catharsis in tragedy, Gilbert remarks that "As a physiologist and psychologist, [Aristotle] knows that the health of a function resides in energy. To have a capacity for a passion and not to realize it, is to make oneself incomplete and limited" (1018). Wilde is making a prescriptive claim here: he's not simply observing that life sometimes involves disruptive passions; rather, he's arguing that we *ought* to undergo a process of self-realization by confronting just those things that seem disruptive and dangerous. A person with the critical spirit "will find his true unity" "though constant change, and through constant change alone [...]. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions. For what is mind but motion in the intellectual sphere? The essence of thought, as the essence of life, is growth" (1048). If one realizes one's potential through one's transformations, through being changed by a confrontation with strange new prospects, then one's existing and established beliefs become an obstacle to be overcome: identification with one's capacity for transformation depends on the ability to dis-identify from one's opinions and feelings.

Wilde derives two very different lessons about moral psychology from biology: on the one hand, we ought to be deeply suspicious about the extent of our deliberate agency; on the other hand, self-realization is a good-in-itself. By appealing selectively to

---

swiftness or strength, into the play of beautiful muscles and molding of fair flesh, into the curves and colors of the hair, the lips, the eye: so the Soul, in its turn, has its nutritive functions also, and can transform into noble moods of thought, and passions of high import, what in itself is base, cruel, and degrading" (916). The analogy shores up the value of an intellectual engagement with things understood to be bad, without treating the aims of thought as a mystification of bodily desire. At the beginning of his career, in a more optimistic register, he had used this parallel to justify the place of apparent errors within human development. In "The Rise of Historical Criticism," written shortly after his graduation from Oxford, Wilde praises Aristotle for the insight that "nature, including the development of man, is not full of incoherent episodes like a bad tragedy, *that inconstancy and anomaly are as impossible in the moral as they are in the physical world*, and that where the superficial observer thinks he sees a revolution the philosophical critic discerns merely the gradual and rational evolution of the inevitable results of certain antecedents" (1125; emphasis added).

these two different discourses, with their differing causal accounts for the development of both psychology and history, Wilde is able to claim intrinsic value for the transformations that happen within the context of an organism's mental life, while finding either no value, or seemingly accidental value in the transformations that happen on a collective scale. Aristotle's organicist model of the soul makes even the seemingly morbid or cruel movements of the mind into necessary stages of its proper process of self-realization, while maintaining its categorical separation from the lower morass of animal instincts that all bodily actions entail. The conjunction between evolutionary biology and Aristotelian biology allows Wilde to address ethical claims differently based on the scale of their ambitions: when he considers the collective, the species, he is deflationary and disenchanted; whatever value he finds, he finds in the individual organism's capacity to actualize its potential in various and diverging ways. Occasionally, Wilde will attest to the public benefits of the critical spirit, but these are secondary effects: he can claim, for example, that Darwin and Renan are critics, and that "It is Criticism that leads us. The Critical Spirit and the World Spirit are one" (1058), but he doesn't have an account of how some products of the critical spirit are taken up by the collective while others are not; neither does he make claims about why they should or shouldn't be, except insofar as they enable individual development.

Nonetheless, though Wilde locates the good at the level of the individual organism, he never claims that we can extricate the mind from crass causality. Though he makes Criticism into another capitalized personification, he doesn't have an argument to extricate it from the mundane material causes that guide everything else. Rather, he uses skepticism about deliberate agency as a goad to encourage the reader to identify with the

mind's capacity for self-transformation, whatever the ultimate causes or effects of that may be. Wilde isn't offering us transcendence; rather, he's proposing that we can self-reflexively identify ourselves with the most distinctly human aspects of our existence by passionately embracing our endless capacity for intellectual transformation. The critical spirit is thus a disposition of self-estranging self-recognition, but not necessarily one that an individual can exercise with deliberate agency, and while it thrives on configuration, there is no clear way for multiple people to share in its exercise, even if they can enjoy some of its results in the form of some stimulating work or idea.

### Representing the Critical Spirit

In order to convey the thrilling changefulness of a person's mental life, Wilde needs to impress upon us the revelatory appeal of suggestive ideas and to shadow them with a sense of their contingency. Thus, even a programmatic essay like "The Critic as Artist" is written as a dialogue, the form of which draws added attention to how ideas arise and acquire expression. He can display the characteristic dynamism of the critical spirit through the ingenious inventions of a fictional proxy without presenting any particular development as a self-contained expression of beliefs. This shouldn't suggest that Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" differs substantially from the positions that Wilde expresses elsewhere—on the contrary, his claims echo the essays and reviews that Wilde published in his own person and anonymously, and he even directly repeats them at times—but rather that the digressions, the finicky complaints of Gilbert remind us that his thoughts are the achievements of a specific person at a particular moment.

The processual quality of the dialogue suggests how Gilbert's way of moving among ideas may be as central as the ideas themselves. Late in the dialogue, Gilbert says that a critic can use dialogue to "convey something of a delicate charm of chance" (1046). This "delicate charm of chance" is one of the most distinctive features of Wilde's critical dialogues. Wilde even has the more passive interlocutor, Ernest, refer to the immense convenience of dialogues for tendentious philosophers, that they allow a thinker to "invent an imaginary antagonist, and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly sophistical argument" (1046). Ernest is reminiscent of one of Socrates's watery followers, and he *is* converted at convenient intervals, but Gilbert is no Socrates. By doggedly undercutting the seriousness of his discourse, Gilbert is able to constantly disclaim the power that he evidently exerts over Ernest. The appealingly flippant style of Wilde's epigrams and his various proxies have become the most recognizable and celebrated aspect of his work. They represent the working of the critical spirit in its most carefree and satisfying manner.

And yet. Wilde's pleasing *sprezzatura* is, perhaps, so overly familiar, that it tends to bely the difficulties and the pessimism of the critical spirit. I have emphasized Wilde's metaphysical commitments and his profound skepticism with regards to deliberate agency, because I want to resist the tradition of reading Wilde's work as gratifyingly liberatory. There are, of course, plenty of pleasures and transgressions in his writing, but his thinking specifically calls into question in what sense a series of disjunctions within a person's life can be accommodated to a desire for meaningful and sustained attachments to other people—something that many people, including Wilde, occasionally desire. Even for the individual, he merely advises that one identify with one's capacity for these

disjunctions. It remains even more questionable how—even whether—the revolutions of the critical spirit can bestow anything more than accidental benefits on a collective.

On the contrary, I want to argue that the critical spirit incorporates a skepticism that is so disruptive as to be nearly self-cancelling, and which creates significant representational problems. I have said that the critical spirit is a reflexive virtue, meaning that it is a disposition of self-recognition. It is unique among the reflexive virtues that I have discussed, because it incorporates a deep suspicion of the means by which it proceeds. Pater discourages his reader from overinvesting in any given disposition, but his project of self-culture is a vision of positive development, with various dispositions persisting and coexisting alongside each other. Wilde, in contrast, advises us to identify with the constant revolutions of our mind. Of someone with the critical spirit, Gilbert says, “Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions. For what is mind but motion in the intellectual sphere?” (1048). The paradox of unity in constant change resolves into an identification of mind with the capacity for motion rather than any particular opinion or thought that might arise and depart. In other words, the recognition of mind as motion relies on the devaluation of the mental states through which it travels.

My aim is to show how Wilde struggles with the constant risk of entangling oneself in a stultifying attachment to some intriguing person. There is a tension in the representation of the critical spirit, because incorporating more self-reflexivity about how merely contingent the value of an opinion or a conviction is makes it difficult to simultaneously represent how powerfully enticing that opinion or conviction can be. Wilde wrote two fictions that capture this tension. *Salome* and “The Portrait of W. H.”

reconstruct individuals that are fundamentally unrecoverable, but, within the self-conscious artifice of these reconstructions, they depict people who are driven mad by their desire for these figures; thus these texts present the aloof workings of the critical spirit while also shadowing it with the ordinary fantasies that trap people. Neither of these works have obtained the popularity of Wilde's society comedies, but there is reason to see each of these as uniquely important to Wilde—*Salome* is the only individual work alluded to when he eulogizes himself in "De Profundis" (912), and he returned to "The Portrait of W. H." after publishing it to dramatically extend the argument of its middle section.<sup>32</sup> Because they attempt to reconstruct historical personages that can only be known through their effects, they are records of Wilde's own creativity (all criticism being a mode of autobiography, as he says in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [17]), but they also attempt to impress the seductive power of their subjects upon his audience while leaving the audience in a critical position, crucially unseduced.

### Recognition outside of *Salome*

*Salome* is a tragedy about lust and prophesy, which turn out to be homologous to each other in both their dangers and inducements. Like a good classical tragedy, *Salome* produces a cathartic purging of dangerous emotions and an ennobling moment of recognition, but the recognition exists only for its audience, not for any of its characters. The failure of recognition *within* the play is all the more striking, because the play is dominated not by actions, but by protracted arguments that circle around the play's central event but fail to bring insight to any character. Wilde constructs three of the play's

---

<sup>32</sup> Vyvyan Holland, "Introduction," *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (NYC: Harper, 2008), 14

historical personages—Salome, Jokanaan (John the Baptist), and Herod—as centers of desire and prophesy, giving them several lengthy speeches in which they narrate potential actions that exceed and precipitate the actual action of the play. They are surrounded by unnamed Semitic characters who have protracted arguments about the nature of God and the coming of the Messiah, oblivious to the momentous event that is unfolding in front of them.

That momentous event is the death of Jokanaan, the forerunner to Jesus, but this moment of cosmic significance is brought about by an arbitrary coincidence between the lust of Salome for Jokanaan and the lust of Herod for Salome. The play dramatically expands the brief Biblical incident in which Herod, seduced by his stepdaughter's sensual dancing, gives her the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Its most striking departure from that account, as well as from other literary representations of it, is to make Salome the title-character, and one of the play's prime movers. Rather than making Salome a pawn of her mother, as Flaubert had done in "Herodias," the play focuses on the girl's desire for John the Baptist and her manipulation of her father's lust.<sup>33</sup> As such, the play makes the erotic desires of a teenager the primary cause of an event with cosmic significance, a fact which has variously thrilled and revolted its critics.

Yet an exclusive focus on Salome and erotic desire distorts the play: it has the perverse effect of simplifying, even purifying lust, when the play does such an admirable job of recognizing the entanglement of desire in power and superstition. In Wilde scholarship, there has been a tendency since the eighties to suppress the play's tragic

---

<sup>33</sup> For an overview of the play's differences from its predecessors, see Julie Townsend, "Staking Salome: Literary Forefathers and Choreographic Daughters." *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*. Ed. Joseph Bristow. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2008. 154-179.

ending out of a desire to find some constructive, liberatory potential in the play's events—to remoralize lust by favorably aligning it with defiance.<sup>34</sup> Regenia Gagnier strikes the keynote for this oddly optimistic critical tradition when she claims that “Wilde’s *Salome* posits the castration of the forces of law and order by the forces of illicit sexual desire.”<sup>35</sup> This is a false opposition through and through: Herod’s political position is insecure from the start, and his lust for his stepdaughter is as illicit as her desire for Jokanaan is. One cause of Gagnier’s error is the old faith that anything transgressive must necessarily be liberatory, but there is a deeper misunderstanding. Power, whether political or sexual, is not finally under the control of any character in the play. Though Salome partially manipulates Herod’s lust for her, the power this gives her is short-lived, and the consequences are fatal. By overloading the play with the frantic desires and projections of three characters, Wilde makes it seem as though the forces driving the events of the play are beyond any one character’s control.

---

<sup>34</sup> Recently, Sharon Marcus has written on the way that Wilde constructs Salome as a paradigm of the conflicting dynamics of celebrity. Marcus is a sophisticated theorist of celebrity, and she recognizes the way that the phenomenon of celebrity has both democratizing and authoritarian dynamics, yet in her article on *Salome*, the emphasis falls overwhelmingly towards Salome’s challenge to Herod’s authority. She argues that the play reflects the democratization of religion and monarchy brought about by nineteenth century celebrity culture, but while the play suggests the arbitrariness of power, this does not entail any transfer of legitimacy to the demos. “In a democratic age,” she argues, “when divinity and royalty were no longer sacred, to be called divine or imperial could not protect celebrities from calumny—just as the monarchs and saints of *Salome* have no immunity from insult.” In particular, she claims that “the ultimate representative of the power of the public and the celebrities it creates is Salome.” These are odd assertions, and for two reasons. First, because the play is full of figures that represent the anonymous public: they are the unnamed Semitic characters that populate the stage (“Jews, Nazarenes, etc.” as the *Dramatis Personae* has it) and carry on religious arguments, oblivious to the significance of the events playing out in front of them. They’re belittled by the play, and they get nothing that they want. Furthermore, while Marcus claims that the play’s “recurrent motifs of regicide and deicide, rarely remarked by critics, further undermine the autarchy of monarchy and religion,” it remains unclear why an attack on the legitimacy of one ruler undermines authoritarianism in general. Salome and Jokanaan both die, even if they each undermine Herod in their different ways; and the events of *Salome* occur in the court of an insecure tyrant on the provincial outskirts of the Roman empire, an authority that receives no more substantial blow than Herod gossiping about Caesar’s gout (Salome 564). Sharon Marcus. “Salome!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity.” *PMLA*. 126.4. 1014-5.

<sup>35</sup> Regenia Gagnier. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1986. 169.

Lust, a compelling desire, becomes parallel to prophesy, a compelling belief. Critics have generally been content to observe that the play is blasphemous, but the intermingling of eroticism and prophesy transforms both. It is common to observe that *Salome* borrows from the style of the “Song of Songs,”<sup>36</sup> but it would be more complete to say that it fuses two poetic modes in the Bible: the courtly eroticism of “Song of Songs,” in which the virtuoso poet proliferates increasingly extravagant metaphors (“Thy hair is like clusters of grapes, like the clusters of black grapes that hang from the vine-trees of Edom in the land of the Edomites”) and a visionary style, in which the prophet strains to express a revelation beyond the capacity of language with increasingly extravagant metaphors (“the sun shall become black like the sackcloth of hair, and the moon shall become like blood, and the stars of the heavens shall fall upon the earth like ripe figs that fall from the fig-tree”) (559; 566). Confronted with the torrents of figurative language that issue from Salome, Jokanaan, and Herod, it is not inherently easy for a reader, much less an audience member, to parse out the boundaries between prophetic and erotic modes. Salome and Jokanaan use both to assert inevitabilities.

Wilde is profaning the prophetic, of course, but he's also filling sexual desire with a dreadful portentousness. At the climax of Salome's first series of erotic entreaties to Jokanaan, one of the courtiers abruptly blurts out, “Ah!” and kills himself, leaving a puddle of blood on stage. This discharge brought about in response to Salome's erotic power becomes the first focal point for Herod's frantic attempts to prophesize about his own fate. When he steps in the puddle, he takes it to be an ill-omen, and he spends much of the play in an agitated state, convinced that he hears the beating of wings (560; 562;

---

<sup>36</sup> Chad Bennett. “Oscar Wilde's *Salomé: Décor, Des Corps, Desire*.” *ELH*. 77.2 (Summer 2010). 303

568). By merging these erotic transports into a narrative that's both scriptural and historical, Wilde makes desire susceptible to the terrifying possibilities of prophecy.

The play treats its fusion of lust and prophecy with a sort of fatalism, as if to suggest that we can attain to a self-reflexive self-recognition of these dangerous driving forces in all of our lives, but not with the hope of controlling them. Crucially, the operation of prophecy in *Salome* never reaches beyond the irregularities of superstition, though a few critics have attempted to find more systematic revelations. Peter Raby writes helpfully about the way that Wilde seems “to construct his own apocryphal text,” with anachronistic references “ranging from Isaiah to the Book of Revelation,” and about the way that remarks from Herod and Herodias are absorbed into Jokanaan’s prophecies; but he is less convincing when he claims that “the play proceeds to what is both a symbolic reenactment of the Fall, and a highly charged, ritualistic scene of synthesis, as Salome assumes a prophetic role in her own search for fulfillment.”<sup>37</sup> Such a higher synthesis seems ill at ease with the ecstatic litanies of Salome, Jokanaan, and Herod: if they borrow each other’s imagery, it’s to manifestly different purposes. The prophetic language in the play doesn’t seem to belong to a higher spiritual logic. It would be more accurate to say that Jokanaan, Salome, and Herod are all driven, by their incompatible desires, to increasingly extreme behavior, and the way that some of their wishes come true is largely beyond their control. The play isn’t a puzzle to be solved. Rather, it’s about

---

<sup>37</sup> Nor is this the only attempt to find a higher synthesis within the play. Joseph Donohue, treating the play as a Symbolist poem centered on Salome’s desire, quotes Arthur Symonds’s definition of the Symbolist movement as an attempt to find “the links which hold the world together, the affirmation of an eternal, minute, intricate, almost invisible life, which runs through the whole universe.” There is reason to think of the play in connection with Symbolism, but once we consider that it has three subjective centers, it seems less like a revelation of a deep unity—on the contrary, anticipatory desire drives the characters in disparate ways. Eros seems rather too powerful to “hold the world together.” Peter Raby. *Oscar Wilde*. NYC: Cambridge UP, 1988. 108-11. Joseph Donohue, “Distance, Death, and Desire in *Salome*.” *Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. NYC: Cambridge UP, 1997. 135.

the way that desire turns the world into a cypher, always promising more than we can possibly realize.

*Salome* eroticizes prophesy, but it also recognizes desire as a strange kind of faith. Others approach this insight—Stendhal describes the beautiful as a promise of happiness, a definition that Nietzsche endorses, and Pater claims that “art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake”—but Wilde emphasizes the blind faith implicit in the desires that are created by beauty.<sup>38</sup> Even in the triumphalism of “The Critic as Artist,” he only ventures that beauty reveals everything because it expresses nothing: that is, beauty promises significance, but doesn't define it, beauty, whether in sumptuous or radiant form, is prophesy without content.

Because the play surrounds its seductions with gaudy, overstuffed litanies, it lets its audience recognize both the power and the farce of desire, a level of self-reflexivity that none of its characters achieve. One of the classical features of tragedy is *anagnorisis*, a moment of recognition. Recognition is central to the working of the critical spirit—recall that, in *The Critic as Artist*, Gilbert expanded Aristotle’s account of catharsis into an exhortation to realize all of one’s intellectual potentialities, however base or morbid they might seem. So it is peculiar that *Salome*, billed as tragedy, is a play in which none of the characters has a moment of recognition. The most likely candidate would be Herod, who comes to see what a mistake he has made by giving Salome a blank check, but he can hardly be said to have a moment of recognition. Instead, he loads the end of the play with long monologues full of extravagant offers intended to persuade Salome to

---

<sup>38</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Maudemarie Clark & Alan J. Swensen, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), 72; Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, 190.

ask for anything other than Jokanaan's head. Even after this bargaining dissipates, as he expresses his fear that something terrible will happen, he remains mired in his own petty tyranny, complaining that someone has drunk his wine (573). Recognition is reserved for the audience, who witnesses the conquering power of desire, but with an inoculating dose of alienation provided by the exhaustingly long speeches. *Salome* is a work of the critical spirit, because it attempts to find beauty and awe in the transformations that we undergo through our desires and projections, without ever trusting either.

“the burden of their memory”

I have said that the exercise of the critical spirit requires a sustained suspicion of the desires and beliefs by which it progresses. *Salome* is Wilde's great study of desire, constructed around the reconstruction of personalities lost to any reliable historical record. By taking a suspicious eye towards the desires that drive people, *Salome* offers its audience a self-reflexive recognition of those forces without denying their necessity or offering control over them. Wilde's most concentrated study of belief is “The Portrait of W. H.,” a generic hybrid in which long essayistic passages lay out a theory about the identity of the young man in Shakespeare's sonnets based in a celebration of the spiritual-erotic friendships of antiquity and the Renaissance, while a frame narrative follows the extreme but futile attempts of three men to maintain a shared belief in that theory. There is a striking disjunction in tone between the essayistic passages, which convey Wilde's evident investment in the value of erotic friendships among men, and the frame narrative, which turns the hope for a shared conviction into something like a farce with disastrous results. The tension between the frame narrative and the essay that it surrounds mirrors

the tension between the critical spirit, with its constantly moving prospect of self-recognition through self-estrangement, and the beliefs that people become attached to along the way.

“The Portrait of W. H.” concerns a theory about the identity of the young man in Shakespeare’s sonnets—using some rather adventurous inferences, Cyril Graham argues that the sonnets must have been dedicated to a young actor named William Hughes, whom he gives the pet name Willie. Its plot concerns the increasingly ridiculous efforts of three men to share their belief in the theory, which they can only believe while they are in the process of convincing someone else. In this story, the idea only has its power while it exists in a state of transition, while it’s activated by the resistance of another mind. When Cyril and his friend Erskine briefly share their belief in Willie Hughes, they stay up all night re-reading the sonnets in a state of intimate bliss, but then Erskine loses his faith. It seems that belief in the theory can only be shared in passing. In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde had celebrated the prospect of identifying with one’s capacity for intellectual transformations through a continual dissatisfaction with one’s existing views; he gave “the critical spirit” a dash of excitement and derring-do. “The Portrait of W. H.” turns this perpetual dissatisfaction with one’s own views into a farce.

In “The Portrait of W. H.,” the central theory doesn’t act as a stable conviction, so much as an index of the changes in the character’s mental lives, and the mechanism of their ill-fated attempts to seduce each other into a shared intimacy. Cyril, the originator of the theory, commissions a forgery of a Renaissance portrait of Willie Hughes to convince Erskine, but when Erskine confronts him about the forgery and renounces the theory, Cyril commits suicide to demonstrate his sincere commitment to the theory; this does

nothing to convince Erskine, but hearing about it immediately convinces the narrator, who becomes obsessed with trying to convince Erskine; yet once he succeeds, he finds that the process of perfectly expressing his commitment to the theory has somehow undermined his own faith in it; Erskine knows that he's dying of consumption and sends the narrator what purports to be a suicide note, as if he can repeat Cyril's tactic and win the narrator's belief. In this story, as in "The Critic as Artist," the mental life is cast as a process in which potentialities are realized through an encounter with what is foreign to the self and then dissipated or discharged, but the impression that "Portrait" makes on the reader is far less dashing. When the narrator reflects on the way that proving the theory to Erskine had undermined his faith in it, he opines that "Influence is simply a transference of personality, a mode of giving away what is most precious to one's soul."<sup>39</sup> Such a chilly, abstract conclusion is a suitable response to the alienating events of the story. The increasingly severe tactics that the men resort to don't do any damage to the charm of the theory, but rather suggest a deep, melancholy suspicion about the prospect of sustained intimacy among people. Like *Salome*, it cultivates the reader's suspicion of the forces that drive the critical spirit forward by making its characters the fools of their desires. Rather than making the life of the mind seductive, it finds the tedium and futility in seduction.

But Wilde wasn't satisfied to leave the theory of Willie Hughes as a fleeting enthusiasm of three fictional characters. Indeed, he is clearly attached to the theory, which becomes a point of access for an even more profound attachment to the value of erotic friendships among men. After publishing "The Portrait of W. H." as a short story,

---

<sup>39</sup> "The Portrait of W. H." 1158; 1196.

Wilde prepared an extended version to be published as a book, and the narrator's full account of the theory amounts to an extended essay taking up the middle three fifths of "The Portrait" before resuming the narrative. Its earnest and studious tone resembles nothing so much as "The Rise of Historical Criticism," the academic essay that Wilde wrote at the beginning of his career. In the narrative passages of "The Portrait," the theory of Willie Hughes is merely a mechanism by which the characters in the story attempt to realize their shifting desires, but in the expanded account of the theory, the homoeroticism of Shakespeare's sonnets becomes a piece of evidence in an argument for the importance of amorous male friendships to the history of European culture. After some thirty pages of wide-ranging, erudite elaboration, he imagines Willie Hughes outliving Shakespeare and traveling to Germany, where he acts as a harbinger of the Enlightenment and dies as a sort of martyr. To the extent that the critical spirit had found its open-endedness in the ongoing life of the individual psyche, these long essayistic passages suggest a turn away from the endless transformations of the present towards the romance of history, a recognition of the self in a tradition and a trajectory. It's unsurprising that Wilde would develop a special fondness for this brilliant mechanism by which he extracted from history a chronicle of homosexual desires where an acceptable one was lacking. His attachment to this obscured history suggests, I think, that Wilde recognized that there were desires that could not be fulfilled within the impersonal discipline of the critical spirit. The fact that Wilde was an imperfect exemplar of the critical spirit does no discredit to his theory, but it does fill in a sense of its stringency, its limitations. The critical spirit makes open-endedness a good-in-itself, but it still depends upon continual discipline.

“whatever is realized is right”

Wilde claims that people realize what is most truly human about themselves by recognizing mind as motion and not as belief: their attempts to reconstruct other people create a record of their own developments, but the maximal realization of themselves requires that they make no attempt to sustain their grasp on other people or themselves. In “The Portrait of W. H.,” we saw how a person might struggle to maintain this level of impersonality.

Wilde demonstrates the strain between the changefulness of the critical spirit and the attachments that form within a human life most vividly in “De Profundis,” because he is both subject and object: it’s not only an artwork, and thus an artifact of his critical spirit, but also a commentary on his own life that captures him in many conflicting modes. “De Profundis” was written in prison as a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, but it was sent to Robert Ross to be copied for future edits; its initial publication suppressed the aspects that addressed Douglas, thus reproducing the duality of its audience in the history of its reception. There has been substantial debate among critics as to how it should be judged.<sup>40</sup> If “De Profundis” is generically confusing, this is in part because it carried such a large practical burden as the only piece of writing Wilde was able to accomplish in

---

<sup>40</sup> It has been thought of, variously, as a work cannily written “to suggest to a consumerist public a revealing autobiography from the depths, as Wilde said, of a soul in pain”; as primarily a “love letter”; as a “spiritual autobiography”; as an act of “homosexual self-fashioning”; and as a hybrid of autobiography and fictionality. Regenia Gagnier. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. Stanford UP, 1986. 179. Richard Ellman. *Oscar Wilde*. NYC: Vintage, 1988. 515. Jay Losey. “The Aesthetics of Exile: Wilde Transforming Dante in *Intentions* and *De Profundis*.” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*. (36:4, 1993). 440. Michael R. Doynen. “Oscar Wilde’s ‘De Profundis’” Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal. *Victorian Literature and Culture*. (27:2, 1999). 547-66. Jerome H. Buckley. “Towards Early-Modern Autobiography: The Roles of Oscar Wilde, George Moore, Edmund Gosse, and Henry Adams.” *Modernism Reconsidered*. Eds: Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983. 5.

prison. It tracks the variety and the magnitude of turns that had occurred in Wilde's mind, and many of its remarks seem in surplus of their immediate context.<sup>41</sup> Though the work has Wilde making claims about his life and his career in various lights, he also emerges as a more narrowly constructed character through those passages that give his critical history of Douglas's behavior in their relationship. Wilde's circumstances had forced him to contend with fragments of his development as a necessary part of his further self-realization. In this letter, we see the critical spirit eat its tail.

Wilde's thinking about the use of exceptional individuals as exemplars undergoes a revision, though "De Profundis" is not the wholesale renunciation of his earlier views that it has sometimes been presented as. He grew to appreciate continuities as a good within people's lives. "At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been," he says. "Art is a symbol because man is a symbol" (922). Contrast this with a remark in "The Critic as Artist": "The man who regards his past is a man who deserves to have no future to look forward to" (1046). This interest in continuity and retrospection—what he had formerly suppressed in favor of potential and disjunction—also has implications for his earlier organicism, which had committed itself to the forward trajectory of natural development. He spells out one of these implications in his reverie about Christ: in the concept of redemption, he finds the possibility that one can substantively transform the past. Redemption "is the means by which one alters one's past. [...] [The Greeks] often say in their gnomic aphorisms 'Even the Gods cannot alter

---

<sup>41</sup> For example, he condemns Douglas's plan of dedicating a book of his poems to Wilde by noting that "it would have brought a wrong atmosphere round the whole work," which leads him to observe that "in modern art atmosphere counts for so much," which he then explains as a result of the complexity and relativity of modern life, which leads him to observe that sculpture can no longer be a representative art form, whereas music can be—a fascinating observation that clearly wants to be developed in a separate context (907).

the past.’ Christ showed that the commonest sinner could do it” (933). It is unsurprising that Wilde’s views would change in the face of stunning affronts to his well-being from the prison system, though he carries over a great deal from his earlier work. One can’t help but wonder how his thinking and his art would have developed if this experience hadn’t so accelerated his demise, but critics—whatever liberties we have—are limited to living in a world where most things don’t happen.

This leaves us with Wilde’s assessment of what he had already been, and it provides an apt characterization of his importance:

I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realized this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realize it afterwards. [...] Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope. [...] I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colors of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder: [...] to truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province and showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence. [...] I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase and all existence in an epigram. (“De Profundis” 912)

Wilde eulogizes himself for his capacity to transmute the significance of things, and thus to train his auditors to recognize the mutability of their mental lives. The sign of his success was not that he was accurately apprehended by his contemporaries, but rather that he had provoked them to “myth and legend.” Walter Pater had said that “to regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought.”<sup>42</sup> Wilde took it upon himself to impose that

---

<sup>42</sup> Pater “Conclusion” 186. Wilde asserts elsewhere in “De Profundis” that “Modern life is complex and relative” (907).

transience, to insinuate it into people's lives by paradox and provocation, to exhort people to realize it.

It's a vocation, of sorts, to heed one's own calling, though we're a far cry from Carlyle. Wilde's final paradox and provocation was to be the exemplary figure of an intellectual and cultural transformation that has made it far more demanding to make use of exemplary figures. To the extent that Wilde, trailed by his various proxies, emerges from his writing as its hero, it isn't as a model for how to confront modernity or bear estrangement or balance one's complexities or even as a strange soul to widen one's experience—he represents, for contemporary readers, our entitlement to our own changefulness.

In the authors that I've discussed, we have seen how it became increasingly difficult to assign stable public meanings to the way that a person conducts his or her life. These difficulties arose alongside exciting possibilities: a heightened awareness of historical change and individual psychology and a greater willingness to imagine lives in different parts of society or even beyond the acceptable boundaries of society as constitutive of one's relationship to history. The literature of reflexive virtue gives us a history of how people have tried to understand their lives as being commensurable with each other, which is also a history of how people in a state of ethical skepticism configure themselves with and through other people. We should wonder whether there is any graceful way for a community of people to converge on shared projects underwritten by shared convictions once they have learned to see themselves as each responding uniquely to their situation in the world. Historicism, which is the *sine qua non* of any truly social thinking in modernity, is also the staging ground of our most involuting energies.

### Afterword – The Persistence of Moralism in Historicism

I have proposed that historicist arguments often depend upon claims about moral psychology, and I have shown some of the ways these claims changed over the course of the Victorian period. But certain ideas about our relationship to history have become so familiar that they are often taken for granted by contemporary critics: in particular, the idea that a person's ethical position is significantly shaped by their historical situation. In this dissertation, I've conceptualized moral psychology with reference to Charles Taylor's concept of "strong evaluations," those that "involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged."<sup>1</sup> By recognizing that our evaluations are not formulated in a private language of desires or inclinations, it becomes possible to analyze the manifold ways in which people relate to the strong evaluations that they variously enact and adapt and resist. Nineteenth-century authors popularized and normalized the idea that one can have a better or worse relationship to one's historical moment. We saw how the process of formulating strong evaluations with reference to history was enmeshed in claims about psychology—about motivation and affinity, for example—and evinced complexities of desire and anxiety beyond those explicitly acknowledged. But it is possible for contemporary critics to participate in the tradition of making interpretive claims about history that communicate value judgments without explicitly justifying the investments or commitments that these interpretations are expected to elicit or stimulate in their readers. After all, interpretations of history can seem vastly more suited for the protocols of

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 2.

academic debate than the dispositions that shape those interpretations or the value judgments that they are expected to convey. In comparison, the motivations that shape strong evaluations and the psychological processes involved in enacting or adapting or resisting them often remain matters of murky speculation.

Nevertheless, strong theories of historicism in twentieth- and twenty-first century criticism have routinely appealed to conjectures about moral psychology in the course of making claims about politics, history, social relations, and methodology. I will close this project on nineteenth-century topics with a few representative instances of their presence in influential works of major scholars of the period in order to give a sense of the range of approaches and the possibilities for clarification opened up by attending to the moral psychology of historicism.

That claims about moral psychology can play a determinative role in even the most politically-oriented arguments is evident in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Every claim about praxis in Benjamin's essay devolves upon a claim about the virtues and vices of the working class and the revolutionary vanguard. He tells us that though the "class struggle [...] is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist," these spiritual things "make their presence felt in the class struggle" as "courage, humor, cunning and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present of the rulers" (IV). Benjamin has claims about the discipline that needs to be maintained to preserve the efficacy of these virtues. He notes that faith in progress has been an aid to fascism and an obstacle to bringing about "the real state of emergency" that would challenge it (VIII), and he says that his model for resisting this idea is analogous to "the

themes which monastic discipline assigned to friars for meditation [which] were designed to turn them away from the world and its affairs” (X). When Benjamin complains that the working class has been weakened by too much hope for reform, he is making a claim about the moral psychology of revolutionary solidarity: “This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren” (XII). Finally, when he’s explaining why historical materialism has to be able to view the present as a moment of arrest, he says that it “supplies a unique experience with the past” and clarifies the nature of that difference by saying, “The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history” (XVI).<sup>2</sup> It is understandable that critics have neglected these paternalistic aspects of Benjamin’s theory in favor of those passages that have been so transformative for how we conceptualize history (e.g., the contrast between messianic time and empty, homogenous time). But Benjamin is right to think that a revolutionary reconceptualization of history cannot transform the world without making demands upon the people who enact it, even though his vision of monastic, sexually-potent theorists and a working class disciplined by its hopelessness is an unacceptable solution to the problem of bringing ideological precision to solidarity, or vice versa. If analysis is intended to motivate praxis, it has to rely on some assumptions about moral psychology, however tentative.

But a critical assessment of moral psychology needn’t take a central role in order to inform historicist criticism. Raymond Williams is exemplary in his ability to both

---

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations* (NYC: Schocken, 2007) 255; 257-8; 260; 262

attend to subtleties of motivation, identification, and ambivalence and to make those psychological dynamics the occasion for further analysis of social conditions. In *The Nostalgic Imagination*, Stefan Collini argues that Williams's *Culture and Society 1780-1950* is shaped by a framework inherited from F. R. Leavis, in which culture is involved in defending values that "had previously been integrated with the lived fabric of life" prior to modernity—an ideal of organicism that Williams would challenge in his subsequent work.<sup>3</sup> I'd like to suggest that Williams has another inheritance from Leavisite moralism that had a more enduring and productive role in his thinking, an investment in the analytical and rhetorical value of exemplary individuals going back to the nineteenth century. *Culture and Society* is so oriented around the fraught scene of individuals emerging into a vertiginous modern society that it begins not with a chronology of events but with "An Outline of Dates," that gives the years "in which the writers discussed were aged 25."<sup>4</sup> Williams not only makes extensive use of exemplary individuals, but he also tends to arrange them by twos in the kind of diptych that John Stuart Mill formed in his essays on Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and which Leavis reinforced as a critical methodology in his republication of those essays. In the chapter on those essays about Bentham and Coleridge, Williams complains that Mill does not pay *more* attention to the processes by which Coleridge's mind works: "The kind of thinking which we observe in Coleridge centers our attention, not on Mill's rationale of a society, but, almost wholly, on the *relations* between personal instance and social institution."<sup>5</sup> Williams' attention to the "*relations* between personal instance and

---

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination* (NYC: Oxford, 2019), 164; 167; 174.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (NYC: Harper, 1958), vii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* 68.

social institution” resonates in his celebrated account of “structures of feeling,” a term that is “concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt,” and with the ways in which the relationships of those meanings and values to

formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable [...] over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. [...] We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone.<sup>6</sup>

Williams’s structures of feeling are not defined by any particular causal or structural account of how psychology works in general, but rather through questions of moral psychology—assent and dissent, interpreted beliefs and justified experiences, impulse and restraint, the ways in which people variously make, maintain, resist, and suffer strong evaluations.

In recent years, it has become increasingly common for arguments about method in the field to devolve upon claims about both the appropriateness of a certain disposition to the present moment *and* the psychological torsion involved in maintaining that disposition. The most enduringly influential of these arguments is probably Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You.” The essay argues that one critical tendency, paranoid reading, no longer serves the demands of the present moment, that it inadequately serves a person’s varied psychological needs, and that it should be balanced with another critical tendency, reparative reading.<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick, while she variously refers to these tendencies in terms of “motive,” “impulse,” “position,” and “cognitive/affective

---

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (NYC: Oxford UP, 1977), 132.

<sup>7</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You,” *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002), 138-51.

theoretical practice,” is essentially arguing that a certain disposition towards history has become a vice and needs to be rebalanced with another disposition.<sup>8</sup> There is no framework suggested for creating that balance, and the two dispositions are analyzed and evaluated on radically different terms. It belongs to paranoid reading to strive after wide and generalizable claims, just as reparative reading tends towards a descriptive approach to what is “near”.<sup>9</sup> To critique paranoid reading, the essay makes its claims both at the level of collective politics and psychological dissatisfaction—she notes, for example, the disconnect between the centrality of “the modern liberal subject” in works of historicist critique and the increasing dominance of antimodern, antiliberal ideologies in American politics, and jokes about how works of theory often glut their readers on one affect.<sup>10</sup> To celebrate reparative reading it turns to scenes of configuration, not only in reparative responses to paranoid texts and contexts, but also in “three very queer friendships” of hers outside of traditional structures (like hierarchies of tutelage or mentorship).<sup>11</sup> Given the differences in their objects, it should be possible for a single life to include both paranoid reading and reparative reading, issuing in forms of activism and activity that aren’t reducible to either—Sedgwick’s evidently did. But the rhetorical energies of the essay, the tone of recrimination and scorn, starting with the title, suggest how difficult such a balance is likely to be. If it seemed necessary to ridicule the pretenses of paranoid reading in order to carve out a place for the value of reparative reading, then one suspects that the very process of recognizing and cultivating the disposition of reparative reading relies on behaviors that fall outside of its ostensible function and aims. There is

---

<sup>8</sup> Sedgwick 138; 144; 149; 150; 126.

<sup>9</sup> Sedgwick 133-6; 144-5.

<sup>10</sup> Sedgwick 139-40; 145-6.

<sup>11</sup> Sedgwick 150-1; 148-9.

something uneasy in the fact that Sedgwick's essay proposes to liberate us from the excesses of one disposition by mockery and by urging another on us without proposing a mechanism for reconciling the two.

I want to argue that this tension between the vagueness of the prescription and the force with which it is given reflects the broader ways in which moral psychology has remained undertheorized in the field. David Kurnick raises similar concerns about Sedgwick's essay (and other entries in the method wars) in "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Other Method Melodramas," an article that incisively captures the reasons to be suspicious of arguments that foreground character: they can overgeneralize or essentialize, and they have the power to convey claims by insinuation that could not be justified empirically or interpretively if they were explicitly asserted. At the same time, as its title indicates, his essay is structured around declaring that "we have been telling a few lies" on behalf of the field of literary studies. The piece is a work of sophisticated moralizing, one which argues that certain claims in the method wars were not misinterpretations, faulty arguments, or rhetorical excesses, but rather acts of dishonesty. Kurnick characterizes the presumptuousness and essentialism of Sedgwick's categories in her essay as "an investment in a dualism that doesn't acknowledge itself as one," and associates that move with "a tendency to cast dualisms as characterologies," both of which he refers to as "durable impulses in Sedgwick's work."<sup>12</sup> In asserting that Kurnick's essay is moralizing and invested in analyzing Sedgwick's character, my aim is not to say that he's *really just* doing the same thing as Sedgwick is in any way that might be understood to reduce the power of his claims. On the contrary, I believe that one of the

---

<sup>12</sup> David Kurnick, "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Other Method Melodramas," *ELH* 87.2 (Summer 2020), 369; 373 n. 40.

best reasons to become self-conscious about the role of moralism and of assumptions about moral psychology in our work is to enable a more nuanced accounting of those investments.

The elements of a debate on the moral psychology of historicism already exist within the tradition of contemporary academic literary criticism, because assumptions about moral psychology have informed many strong theories of the function and practice of historically self-reflexive criticism. Nor are claims about moral psychology likely to become any less important in the near future. Kurnick is right to suggest that many entries in the method wars have had a spirit of self-flagellation about them, “a last-ditch attempt to imagine that we can adjust our position in the world with a change of attitude.”<sup>13</sup> But the continual re-interpretation of the value of our work is a persistent feature of our discipline, one that is likely to become more, not less, pronounced as our institutional position continues to deteriorate. As our work derives less of its form and significance from a stable and supportive institutional context, its coherence and continuity as a social practice may well come to depend more on shared interpretations of why and how we should value it.

---

<sup>13</sup> Kurnick, 369.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ablow, Rachel. "Reading and Re-reading: Wilde, Newman, and the Fiction of Belief." *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience & Victorian Literature*. Ed. Rachel Ablow. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2010. 157-78.
- Albrecht, Thomas. "'That Free Play of Human Affection': The Humanist Ethics of Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*." *Nineteenth Century Literature*. 73:4: 483-521.
- Annas, Julia. *Intelligent Virtue*. NYC: Oxford UP, 2011.
- Anderson, Amanda. *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001.
- . *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006.
- . *Bleak Liberalism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2016.
- . *Psyche and Ethos: Moral Life after Psychology*. NYC: Oxford UP, 2018.
- Anger, Suzy. *Victorian Interpretation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2005.
- Arata, Stephen. "The Impersonal Intimacy of *Marius the Epicurean*." *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience & Victorian Literature*. Ed. Rachel Ablow. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2010. 131-56.
- Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard McKeon. NYC: Modern Library, 2001.
- Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*. NYC: Routledge, 1993.
- Atkinson, Juliette. *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives*. NYC: Oxford UP, 2010.
- Auerbach, Erich. "Figura." *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984. 11-76.
- Avery, Simon and Rebecca Stott. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. London: Longman, 2003.
- Barnes, Mollie. "Historical Imagination in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows*." *Victorian Poetry*. 54:1 (Spring 2016): 39-65.
- Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: 1845-1846*. Two volumes. Ed. Elvan Kintner. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969.
- . *Diary by E. B. B.: The Unpublished Diary of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1831-2*. Ed. Philip Kelley & Ronald Hudson. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1969.
- . *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Ed. Ruth M. Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.
- . *Aurora Leigh*. Ed. Margaret Reynolds. NYC: Norton, 1996.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. NYC: Schocken, 2007.
- Bennett, Chad. "Oscar Wilde's *Salome*: Décor, Des Corps, Desire." *ELH*. 77.2 (Summer 2010): 297-323.
- Bentley, Eric. *A Century of Hero-Worship*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957.
- Best, Stephen and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations*. 108.1 (Fall 2009). 1-21.
- Bonfiglio, Richard. "Liberal Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of the Heart(h): Mazzini, Gladstone, and Barrett Browning's Domestication of the Italian Risorgimento." *Modern Philology*. 111:2 (November 2013): 281-307.

- Booth, Alison. *How to Make it as a Woman*. Chicago, U of Chicago P, 2004.
- Brake, Laurel, Lesley Higgins, & Carolyn Williams, eds. *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*. Greensboro, NC: ELT P, 2002.
- Brilmyer, S. Pearl. "'The Natural History of My Inward Self': Sensing Character in George Eliot's *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*." *PMLA*. 129.1 (2014): 35-51.
- . "Plasticity, Form, and the Matter of Character in *Middlemarch*." *Representations*. 130.1 (Spring 2015): 60-83.
- Bristow, Joseph. *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885*. NYC: Columbia UP, 1995.
- Brown, Julia Prewitt. *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art*. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 1997.
- Buckler, William E. "Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic of the Self: Art as Imaginative Self-Realization in *De Profundis*." *Biography*. 12.2 (Spring 1989): 95-115.
- Buckley, Jerome H. "Towards Early-Modern Autobiography: The Roles of Oscar Wilde, George Moore, Edmund Gosse, and Henry Adams." *Modernism Reconsidered*. Eds. Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Buell, Lawrence. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics." *The Turn to Ethics*, NYC: Routledge, 2000. 1-14.
- Calloway, Stephen. "Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses." *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. NYC: Cambridge UP, 2006. 34-54.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *Carlyle's Complete Works*. NYC: Lovell, 1869.
- Carlyle, Thomas & Ralph Waldo Emerson. *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*. Ed. Joseph Slater. NYC: Columbia UP, 1964.
- Case, Alison. "Gender and Narration in *Aurora Leigh*." *Victorian Poetry*. 29:1 (1991): 25-32.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Must we Mean What We Say?* Updated edition. NYC: Cambridge, UP, 2002.
- . *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. New edition. NYC: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Chandler, James. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.
- Chaney, Christine. "The 'Prophet-Poet's Book.'" *SEL*. 48:4 (Autumn 2008): 791-9.
- Chapman, Alison and Jane Stabler, eds. *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003.
- Clough, Arthur Hugh. "Introduction." *Plutarch's Lives*. NYC: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1912.
- Collini, Stefan. *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- . *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019.
- Daley, Kenneth. *The Rescue of Romanticism: Walter Pater and John Ruskin*. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2001.
- Danson, Lawrence. *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Dawson, Gowan. *Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability*. NYC: Cambridge UP, 2007.

- DeLaura, David. "Romola and the Origin of the Paterian View of Life." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 21.3 (December 1966): 225-33.
- . *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater*. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1969.
- de Man, Paul. *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Diderot, Denis. *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream*. Trans. Leonard Tancock. NYC: Penguin, 1966.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991.
- Donohue, Joseph. "Distance, Death, and Desire in *Salome*." *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. NYC: Cambridge UP, 2006. 118-42.
- Doylen, Michael R. "Oscar Wilde's 'De Profundis': Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal." *Victorian Literature and Culture*. 27.2 (1999): 547-66.
- Dryden, John. "The Life of Plutarch." *Plutarch's lives, translated from the original Greek. With notes critical and historical; and a life of Plutarch*. By S. Langhorne, D.D. William Langhorne, A.M. John Dryden, &c. Vol. 1. Edinburgh: Printed for C. Elliott, High Street, W. Creech, Parliament Close, and R. Munro, Nicholson Street, also J. Lackinton, 46, and 47, Chiswell Street, MDCCXCV. [1795]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Web. 1 Aug. 2016.  
<<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do&source=gale&docLevel=FASCIMILE&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=new67449&tabID=T001&docId=CB3330471740&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0>>
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- Eliot, George. *The George Eliot Letters*. Nine volumes. Ed. Gordon Haight. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1954.
- . *Romola*. NYC: Penguin, 1980.
- . *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*. Ed. A. S. Byatt & Nicholas Warren. NYC: Penguin, 1990.
- . *Middlemarch*. NYC: Penguin, 1994.
- . *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. Rutland, VT: Everyman, 1995.
- . *The Mill on the Floss*. London: Wordsworth Classics, 1999.
- . *The Spanish Gypsy, the Legend of Jubal, and Other Poems Old and New*. Honolulu, HI: UP of the Pacific, 2003.
- . *Adam Bede*. NYC: Penguin, 2008.
- . *Daniel Deronda*. NYC: Oxford World's Classics, 2014.
- Ellman, Richard. "Introduction: The Critic as Artist as Wilde." *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Richard Ellman. NYC: Random House, 1969.
- . *Oscar Wilde*. NYC: Vintage, 1987.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. NYC: Library of America, 1983.
- Enright, D. J. "Introduction." *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. Rutland, VT: Everyman, 1995.
- Evangelista, Stefan. *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile*. NYC: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

- Fessenbecker, Patrick. "Sympathy, Vocation, and Moral Deliberation in George Eliot." *ELH*. 85.2 (2018): 501–32.
- . "In Defense of Paraphrase." *NLH*. 44.1 (2013): 117–39.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. Trans. George Eliot. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2008.
- Gagnier, Regina. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1986.
- . "Wilde and the Victorians." *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. NYC: Cambridge UP, 2006. 18–33.
- Gallagher, Catherine. *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832–1867*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985.
- . "George Elliot: Immanent Victorian." *Representations*. 90.1 (Spring 2005). 61–74.
- Gallagher, Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000.
- Garber, Marjorie, Beatrice Hanssen, & Rebecca Walkowitz. "Introduction: The Turn to Ethics." *The Turn to Ethics*, NYC: Routledge, 2000. vii–xii.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. "From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento." *PMLA*. 99:2 (March 1984): 194–211.
- Gilmour, David. *The Pursuit of Italy: A History of a Land, its Regions, and their People*. NYC: FSG, 2012.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Trans. Eric A Blackall. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989.
- Greiner, Rae. *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2012.
- Griffin, Cristina Richieri. "George Eliot's Feuerbach: Senses, Sympathy, Omniscience, and Secularism." 84.2 (Summer 2017): 475–502.
- Hadley, Elaine. *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010.
- Haight, Gordon S. *George Eliot: A Biography*. NYC: Oxford UP, 1968.
- Hardy, Barbara. *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form*. London: The Athlone Press, 1959.
- Harris, Leigh Coral. "From 'Mythos' to 'Logos': Political Aesthetics and Liminal Poetics in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Casa Guidi Windows.'" *Victorian Literature and Culture*. 28:1 (2000): 109–31.
- Hazlitt, William. *The Spirit of the Age, Or, Contemporary Portraits*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Ed. W. Carew Hazlitt. NYC: George Bell and Sons, 1894.
- . "On the Knowledge of Character." *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt in Twelve Volumes*. VI. NYC: McClure, Philips & Co, 1903.
- Hegel, G. F. W. "Introduction: 'Reason in History.'" *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Trans. H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 1972.
- Hemans, Felicia. *Records of Women*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 1999.
- Hertz, Neil. *George Eliot's Pulse*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Holland, Merlin. "Biography and the Art of Lying." *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. NYC: Cambridge UP, 2006. 3–17.

- Holland, Vyvyan. "Introduction." *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. NYC: Harper Perennial, 2008.
- Holloway, John. *The Victorian Sage*. NYC: Macmillon & Co, 1953.
- Hook, Sidney. *The Hero in History*. Boston: Beacon P, 1943.
- Houghton, Walter E. *The Victorian Frame of Mind*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1957.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. *On Virtue Ethics*. NYC: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind & Glen Pettigrove. "Virtue Ethics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (December 8, 2016 edition); Edward N. Zalta (ed.) URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>.
- Irwin, T. H. "Nil Admirari? Uses and Abuses of Admiration." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume LXXXIX* (2015) 223-48
- Jaffe, Audrey. *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2000.
- Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981.
- Jewusiak, Jacob. "Large-Scale Sympathy and Simultaneity in George Eliot's *Romola*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. 54.4 (Autumn 2014): 853-74.
- Kaplan, Fred. *Thomas Carlyle: A Biography*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Romantic Image*. NYC: Random House, 1957.
- Knights, Ben. *The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century*. NYC: Cambridge, 1978.
- Kosellek, Reinhart. *Future's Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. Keith Tribe. Boston: MIT P, 1985.
- Kurnick, David. "An Erotics of Detachment: *Middlemarch* and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice." *ELH*. 74.3 (2007): 583-608.
- . "Abstraction and the Subject of Novel Reading: Drifting through *Romola*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. 42:3. (Fall 2009): 490-6.
- . *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2012.
- . "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Other Method Melodramas." *ELH*. 87.2 (Summer 2020): 349-74.
- Leavis, F. R. "Introduction." *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*. NYC: Cambridge UP, 1980.
- Lecourt, Sebastian. *Cultivating Belief: Victorian Anthropology, Liberal Aesthetics, and the Secular Imagination*. NYC: Oxford UP, 2018.
- Leighton, Angela. *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1992.
- Lewis, Linda. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1998.
- Levine, George. *The Boundaries of Fiction*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1968.
- . *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002.
- Lootens, Tricia. *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2017.
- Losey, Jay. "The Aesthetics of Exile: Wilde Transforming Dante in *Intentions* and *De Profundis*." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*. 36.4 (1993): 429-50.

- Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007.
- Lukács, Georg. *Theory of the Novel*. Boston: MIT Press, 1971.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 2007.
- Marcus, Sharon. "Salomé!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity." *PMLA*. 126.4: 999-1021.
- Marx, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach." *The Marx-Engels Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. NYC: Norton, 1978. 143-5.
- Mellor, Anne K. *English Romantic Irony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980.
- Mermin, Dorothy. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Autobiography and other writings*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969.
- . *On Liberty and Other Writings*. Ed. Stefan Collini. NYC: U of Cambridge P, 1989.
- . *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. 33 vols. Ed. John M. Robson. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1963-1991.
- . *Letters of J. S. Mill*. Two volumes. Ed. Hugh S. R. Elliot. Longman's Green & Co: London, 1910.
- Miller, Andrew H. *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth Century British Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2008.
- Miller, D. A. *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981.
- Miller, Christian B. *Character and Moral Psychology*. NYC: Oxford UP, 2014.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Narrative and History." *ELH*. 41.3 (Autumn, 1974): 455-73.
- . "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*." *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*. Ed. Jerome H. Buckley. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975.
- . "Walter Pater: A Partial Portrait." *Walter Pater*. Ed. Harold Bloom. NYC: Chelsea House P, 1985. 75-95.
- . *Victorian Subjects*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991.
- Mitchell, Sally. "Review of *How to Make it as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 61.3 (December 2006). 378-81.
- Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. NYC: Verso, 2000.
- Neff, Emery Edward. *Carlyle and Mill: An Introduction to Victorian Thought*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. NYC: Octagon Books, 1974.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Maudemarie Clark & Alan J. Swensen. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998.
- . *The Gay Science*. Trans. Josefine Nauckhoff. NYC: Cambridge UP 2006.
- Nunokawa, Jeff. *Tame Passions of Wilde: The Styles of Manageable Desire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. NYC: Oxford UP, 1990.

- . “Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?” *The Journal of Ethics*. Vol. 3, No. 3 (1999): 163-201.
- Pater, Walter. *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Macmillan and Co., 1885.
- . *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Ed. Donald Hill. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1980.
- . *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts (The Renaissance, Appreciations, and Imaginary Portraits)*. Ed. William E Buckler. NYC: New York UP, 1986.
- . “Diaphaneité.” *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. NYC: Oxford World’s Classics, 2010. 137-40.
- Pinch, Adela. *Thinking about Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing*. NYC: Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1972.
- Plutarch. *Lives*. The Dryden Translation. Ed. Arthur Hugh Clough. NYC: Modern Library, 2001.
- Pocock, J. G. A. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1975.
- Qualls, Barry. *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Literature*. NYC: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Raby, Peter. *Oscar Wilde*. NYC: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Reynolds, Matthew. *The Realms of Verse 1830-1870: English Poetry in a time of Nation-Building*. NYC: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Rosenblum, Dolores. “Casa Guidi Windows and Aurora Leigh: The Genesis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Visionary Aesthetic,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 4:1 (Spring, 1985): 61-8.
- Rosenthal, Jesse. *Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2016.
- Ross, Robert. “A Note on *Salome*.” <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/42704/42704-h/42704-h.htm>
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract and other later political writings*. Ed. Victor Gourevitch. NYC: Cambridge UP, 2007.
- Rudy, Jason. *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics*. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2009.
- Russell, David. *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2017.
- Schaffer, Talia. “Care Communities: Ethics, Fictions, Temporalities.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 118:3 (July, 2019): 521-42.
- Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Trans. W. Montgomery, J. R. Coates, Susan Cupitt, and John Bowden. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1990.
- . *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003.
- Shaw, Harry E. *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999.

- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. 1818 text. NYC: Oxford World's Classics, 1993.
- Shewan, Rodney. *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egoism*. London: Macmillan, 1977.
- Seigel, Jules Paul, ed. *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1971.
- Siegel, Jonah. *Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth-Century Culture of Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000.
- Sorensen, David R. "Introduction." *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroric in History*. Ed. David Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser. New Haven: Yale UP, 2013. 1-16.
- Star, Summer J. "Feeling Real in *Middlemarch*." *ELH*. 80.3 (Fall 2013): 839-69.
- Stone, Marjorie. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. NYC: St. Martin's P, 1995.
- Strawson, P. F. "Freedom and Resentment." *Proceedings of the British Academy*. 48 (1962): 1-25.
- Sussman, Matthew. "Stylistic Virtue in Nineteenth-Century Criticism." *Victorian Studies*. 56.2: 225-49.
- Tamarkin, Elisa. "Why Forgive Carlyle?" *Representations*. 134.1 (Spring 2016): 64-92.
- Taylor, Charles. "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," *The Review of Metaphysics* 25.1 (September 1971): 3-51.
- . *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Tennyson, G. B., *Sartor Called Resartus: The Genesis, Structure, and Style of Thomas Carlyle's First Major Work*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1966.
- Townsend, Julie. "Staking Salome: Literary Forefathers and Choreographic Daughters." *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*. Ed. Joseph Bristow. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2008. 154-79
- Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1972.
- Tucker, Herbert. *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910*. NYC: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Vermeule, Blakey. "A Comeuppance Theory of Narrative and the Emotions," *Subversion and Sympathy: Gender, Law, and the British Novel*. Ed. Martha C. Nussbaum & Alison L LaCroix. NYC: Oxford UP, 2013. 288-305.
- Whiteley, Giles. *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism*. London: Legenda, 2010.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*. NYC: Harcourt, 1962.
- . *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Richard Ellman. NYC: Random House, 1969.
- . *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. NYC: Harper Perennial, 2008.
- Williams, Carolyn. *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989.
- . "Moving Pictures: George Eliot and Melodrama." *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*. Ed. Lauren Berlant. NYC: Routledge, 2004.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*. NYC: Columbia UP, 1958.
- . *The Country and the City*. NYC: Oxford UP, 1973.
- . *Marxism and Literature*. NYC: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Major Works*. Ed. Stephen Gill. NYC: Oxford UP, 2011.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Flush: A Biography*. NYC: Harcourt, 1933.
- . *The Second Common Reader*. Annotated Edition. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. NYC: Harcourt, 1986.

- Yousef, Nancy. *Isolated Cases: The Anxiety of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2004.
- . *Romantic Intimacy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2013.
- Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. NYC: Oxford UP, 2017.