

Active Distance: British Nineteenth-Century Literature and Images of the Past

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2014

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ABSTRACT

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How did British nineteenth-century literature articulate its relationship to the past? In *Past and Present* (1843), Thomas Carlyle introduces the Middle Ages through a description of what he believed the collar of a serf would have looked like, dwelling on the shine of the brass as it would have stood out against the green of the forest, as if it were a painting to be evaluated aesthetically for its color palette rather than part of a controversial defense of medieval feudalism. In *Adam Bede* (1859), George Eliot compares the eighteenth-century setting of her novel to a realist painting, pointing out the visual details that would appear unfamiliar to her contemporary readers, such a “mob-cap” or an old-fashioned spinning-wheel. These moments may appear like intermittent, typically Victorian examples of intrusive editorializing that risk repelling readers from engaging with the world of the past. But my dissertation shows that Carlyle and Eliot are part of a large and important body of Victorian historical texts that seek to engage their reader closer with their evocation of the past through the visual imagination. Romantic historiography had introduced the idea of seeing the past “in the mind’s eye”, and Victorian writers frequently asked their readers to explicitly treat the past as if it were itself an image. My dissertation argues that a tradition emerged during the nineteenth century which sought to develop that language of vision for a particular purpose: to observe the striking distance, and differences, between the past and the present. And the effect is not one of detachment but its opposite: historical distance is the connecting device that ties the reader to the text, across Victorian historical works.

My dissertation moves through the Victorian period broadly conceived, from 1820 to the 1890s, and across genres of novels, poetry and non-fiction prose. This breadth of scope is

a consequence of my argument. Many critics treat, for instance, Thomas Macaulay's constant shifts between past and present as a feature of his idiosyncratic style, or Elizabeth Gaskell's minute descriptions of Napoleon-era uniforms as distinctive of the genre of realism. But I show that Victorian literature that deals with the past needs to be understood across styles and genres, in the broader cultural context of their era's fascination with historical distance.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the emphasis on the gap between past and present serves to engage, rather than repel, the reader's imaginative investment in the world of the past. The distance between the past and the present works to immerse the Victorian reader more fully in the imagined past, thereby cultivating a more actively critical engagement with history.

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Acknowledgements

My advisors – Nicholas Dames, Erik Gray and Sharon Marcus – have in every way exceeded expectations of how perceptive, gracious, incisive, reasonable, kind and just plain *wise* a dissertation committee can be. Nicholas Dames combines dazzling intellectual virtuosity with abundant patience and generosity. Erik Gray offers unswerving enthusiasm and encouragement, while he also always pushes me to do better, leading by example. Sharon Marcus is like a one-person cure to all the world’s writing ills. She sees to the heart of the argument every time, and makes me want to see it too. The three of them are a wonder.

At Columbia, we have a wonderful group of graduate students and faculty gather regularly in the Nineteenth-Century Colloquium; I owe much of the early inspiration for my project to the thoughtful and exciting discussions that are still ongoing there. Particular thanks go to participants past and present Deborah Aschkenes, Anna Clark, Dehn Gilmore, Abigail Joseph, Sarah Minsloff, Olivia Moy, Ben Parker and Daniel Wright.

I’m grateful to teachers and mentors of the past, because they opened the doors that mattered: Josephine McDonagh, Philip McGowan, Jon Mee, Helen Small and Andrew Teverson all helped to make my rather unlikely dreams become a reality.

My father liked to quote P.G. Wodehouse’s dedication to his step-daughter Leonora “without whose never-failing sympathy and encouragement this book would have been finished in half the time.” Dad could relate, times five. He is no longer with us, but it’s safe to say that without him my dissertation would not only be unfinished, but hardly exist at all: any thanks and blame for getting me into this whole literature game in the first place must go to Runo Lindskog.

My mother Ingrid has been a source of constant enthusiasm, support, intelligent questions and some crucial end-game moments of domestic assistance. There are no signs any of that will change upon my completion of the PhD. So love, thanks and future apologies to her.

My siblings Björn, Maria, Mattias and Toffe with their families deserve a mention here, because they're extraordinary people, and I'm quite fond of them. And I can always count on them to find my sunglasses.

I'm grateful to Aliya, Blainey, Keith, Janice and Sam for expanding my idea of family in the best possible ways. They're a home away from home.

I'm lucky to be continually inspired by Deborah Aschkenes, Cecilia Beretta, Célia Charpentier, Annie Cotton, Jennifer Davis, Deborah Friedell, Lucy Hornigold, Sara Jangfeldt, Elisabeth Jansson, Helena Lambert, Sarah Minsloff, Emilie Nyman, Johanna van Rooij, and Sira Stampe Villadsen. All of them are brilliant people, which makes it even more remarkable that they are also such loyal and loving friends. And the equally exceptional Jess Fenn and Lytton Smith: I look forward to creating happy writing memories together for many years to come.

I owe thanks to Amanda, Annelie and Sofia who turned up, pitched in, and made it not only possible, but a pleasure, to get things done.

Samuel Ingemar was, if I'm honest, of no help whatsoever to the process of thesis-writing, but he more than makes up for it by being a complete and utter joy.

Finally, this dissertation belongs to Joseph. You're not just my true north, you're the whole compass.

For Joseph North

Introduction

It has become a critical commonplace to consider the nineteenth century an era of historical curiosity and discovery. From the perspective of the present, Victorian Britain's interest in the past appears such a dominant characteristic of its culture that to point to its importance threatens to seem redundant. But even though we know a concern with the past is crucial to nineteenth-century British culture, my dissertation suggests there are nevertheless rather large, basic questions about its literary elements that remain unanswered. What characterizes the particular Victorian sense of the past that we encounter in the period's writings? How *did* British nineteenth-century literature articulate its relationship to the past?

My dissertation offers answers to the questions raised above by addressing the ways in which British nineteenth-century literature engages the reader's visual imagination to evoke the past. Romantic historiography introduced the idea of seeing the past "in the mind's eye" and Victorian writers of all genres subsequently asked their readers to "look" at scenes of the past as if they were viewing an image. In fact, Victorian writers frequently treat the past itself as if it were an image. Rosemary Mitchell, who calls the "historical curiosity" of nineteenth century Britain "unprecedented in the Western world", also thinks that the Victorians helped to build – and pass down to us – a "historical culture in which the visual was as significant as the textual."¹ I argue that a tradition emerged during the nineteenth century that sought to imagine the past in the reader's "mind's eye" for a particular purpose: to observe the striking contrast, and consequent distance, between the past and the present. From Walter Scott's gentle mockery of eighteenth-century dress fashion in *Waverley*, through the pre-Raphaelites' worship of medieval architecture, and all the way up to late-Victorian

¹ Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past: English History in Text and Image 1830-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

authors' fascination with rapidly changing landscapes and art forms, British nineteenth-century writers are concerned with the historical distance between the past and the present – and the ways that distance can be evoked in the reader's visual imagination.

In historiographical studies, there has been a modest but noticeable upsurge of interest in the concept of historical distance in the last decade, due in large part to Mark Salber Phillips' interdisciplinary efforts to engage scholars of art, historiography and literature on the subject. He explains the idea of historical distance through its development in the nineteenth-century:

Since the late eighteenth century at least, Europeans have seen some sort of distancing as bound up with historical knowledge. Yet the same condition of estrangement also produces a strong countercurrent, encouraging a widespread desire to recapture a feeling of historical intimacy and connected tradition [...] a genuine encounter with the past must trace a path from initial recognition of alterity to some form of insight and comprehension. Far from putting an end to the desire for engagement, modernity's preoccupation with rupture has made the desire to abbreviate distance all the more compelling.²

Since the era of the French Revolution, the way we imagine historical distance has been “bound up with historical knowledge” – but it also, crucially, offers a way to connect to the past, to “trace a path” from “alterity” to “insight and comprehension.”

The literary implications of that idea are not only exciting, but also comprehensive. It suggests that, throughout the Victorian era, historical distance serves to engage rather than repel the reader's imaginative investment in the world of the past. As Ann Rigney points out, nineteenth-century representations of historical subjects are premised as much on the absence or loss of past reality as on their former existence.³ Put another way, to quote Lionel Trilling's famous essay, “it is only if we are aware of the reality of the past as past that we can feel it as alive and present”; if we accept the past as beyond reach, we can gain access to

² Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 2.

³ Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 2.

its most significant qualities.⁴ Here, I am arguing most directly against Georg Lukács, who considers the reverse to be true; he finds that nineteenth-century historical distance, (exemplified to him in Charles Baudelaire's poetry) is "simply a negation of the present", a nostalgic longing to be elsewhere: "away is more important than where."⁵ But my thesis seeks to show that, to a nineteenth-century reader, the effect of imagining the historical distance that spans between past and present is not one of vague detachment but its opposite: a sense of connection, and what can be called an *active* engagement between reader and text.

The idea of historical distance seems to have produced descriptions reliant on the visual, or spatial, imagination from very early on. It makes sense: paying attention to the ways the looks, the visual appearances, of the past contrast with the present functions well as a kind of short hand to convey the ways in which the past seems and feels different from the present. Ted Underwood suggests that the nineteenth-century metaphor of "historical perspective" "improves on older metaphors like "breadth" by evoking the "limitations of visual experience" and that "this way of imagining the value of history can be traced back to the end of the eighteenth century."⁶ Underwood does not care particularly about the visual metaphor itself, but "in the implications that cluster around it", of which he considers the limitations of historical knowledge as a question of vantage point to be the most important to nineteenth-century historiography.⁷ He is not alone in this assessment; one of the ways in which my project seeks to change the conversation about historical consciousness in Victorian literature is to insist on the crucial importance of the visual imagination as a literary tool for writers that deal with the past, across genres and literary schools. Jaap van der Hollander, Herman Paul and Rik Peters offer a brief summary of the history of the term

⁴ Lionel Trilling, 'The Sense of the Past', *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Harcourt, 1950), 177.

⁵ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, transl. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 232.

⁶ Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

“historical distance”, and trace it back to the German historicist tradition and particularly to Wilhelm von Humboldt, who in 1821 proclaimed the historian’s task was to find historical truth which can be found “rather like the clouds which take shape for the eye only at a distance.”⁸ But the language of vision in British nineteenth-century literature does not only involve descriptions of what the past looks like. We also encounter the frequent and consistent use of visual metaphors; a myriad of comparisons between imagining the past and looking at paintings, tableaux, panoramas and through *camera lucidas*. In their subsequent discussion of Johan Huizinga, the *History & Theory* editors suggest that nineteenth-century historiography taught historians to operate in the same way as spectators at an art museum:

...as museum visitors learn to discern visual patterns in a seventeenth-century oil painting: by standing several feet away, their heads slightly inclined, their eyebrows furrowed. For Huizinga, spatial distance is what makes both artistic and historical interpretation possible. Without a certain distance between one’s present and the past under investigation, the contours of one’s object of study remain vague and indiscernible.⁹

There is of course a paradox inherent in Huizinga’s insistence on distance as a prerequisite to “see” the past better; in most cases our physical eyes perceive an object better at close proximity than from further away. But you could also say that what Huizinga identifies here is only a desire to step back in order to see the past as a *whole*, rather than to investigate details in “close-up”. However, my thesis argues that the concept of historical distance is more complex, as well as more capacious, than a distinction between “far” and “close” or “whole” and “detail” suggests. In our own academic work as scholars and teachers, the temptation can be to energize the classroom or our written work through emphasizing how

⁸ Quoted in Jaap van der Hollander, Herman Paul and Rik Peters, ‘Introduction: The Metaphor of Historical Distance’ in *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, Vol. 50 (December 2011), 3.

⁹ *History and Theory*, Vol. 50, 2. Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) refused to lecture on twentieth-century history because he felt no historian could responsibly analyse the past without at least a century of distance between themselves and their subject. Van der Hollander, Paul and Peters point out that “[f]or such a highly visually-oriented scholar as Huizinga, understanding the past was a matter of recognizing lines and shapes, colors and contrasts, and dramatic patterns like the epic and the tragedy” (2).

similar, and therefore relevant, the past is to our own time. But the metaphor of distance suggests, to the tradition represented by von Humboldt and Huizinga, that only by acknowledging the distance between past and present can we overcome it. In other words, they believe in a process of historical engagement *through* rather than despite distance.

A metaphor is not necessarily just a disguise we must rip off in order to get to the important revelations and truths underneath. Indeed, once the metaphor is as prevalent as the concept of visualizing historical distance in British nineteenth-century literature, I think we must take the choice of metaphor itself seriously. I argue that British nineteenth-century literature uses the reader's visual imagination to, simultaneously, evoke the distance between the past and the reader's present and to engage the reader's investment in the looks of the past in order to draw us imaginatively closer to the historical era represented on the page. When Victorian historical texts evoke the past visually, the reader enters into an active and sometimes even collaborative relationship with the text, with the purpose of establishing the temporal gap – the historical distance – between past and present.

Within Victorian literary studies, a great deal of exciting work has been produced about the genre of Romantic historiography and its influence on Victorian attitudes to the past, about the relationship between British nineteenth-century visual culture and modernity, as well as more genre-specific studies of, for example, the relationship between poetry and painting, or the historical novel and its impact on historiography.¹⁰ While my project draws on many of these studies, it also aims to consider a somewhat broader perspective on the relationship between a nineteenth-century sense of the past, or historical consciousness if you will, and the visual imagination as it is conveyed in the literature of the period. My chapters

¹⁰ It should be noted that, in terms of covering genres of writing about the past, my thesis sidesteps the relationship of drama to historiography, visuality and the Victorian sense of the past. This is a rich field of study that I look forward to familiarizing myself with thoroughly when I revise this dissertation into a book. For an interesting discussion of mid-century stage performance and Thomas Carlyle's history-writing, see Thomas Schoch, "'We do Nothing but Enact History': Thomas Carlyle Stages the Past", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 54, Issue 1 (June 1999), 27-52.

span the Victorian period broadly conceived, from 1820 to 1890, and moves across poetry, novels and non-fiction prose. This breadth of scope is a consequence of my argument. Many critics treat, for instance, Carlyle's constant shifts between past and present as a feature of his particular style, or George Eliot's minute descriptions of Renaissance street fairs as distinctive of the genre of realism. But I show that they need to be understood across styles and genres, in the broader cultural context of the Victorian fascination with historical distance. Though one chapter considers historical distance in its particular relation to romance, my thesis argues that, across British nineteenth-century works of *all* genres, historical distance helps to involve the reader in an active engagement with the text.

Sir Walter Scott is a key figure here, not just because he helped to create the genre of the historical novel, but because he helped familiarize British readers with a particular kind of re-creation of past events as a method of sympathetic connection.¹¹ He consistently directs his readers' attention to the difference, the distance travelled, between the historical setting of his text and the present of its audience. Because historical change is gradual, Scott suggests, one needs to fix one's eyes on a particular point in the past in order to be conscious of it, and thus see more clearly what ties us with, as well as separates us from, the past. The opening pages of *Waverley, or 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814) introduce the space between past and present by assuring the reader that distance does not always equate difference:

¹¹ Nineteenth and early twentieth-century accounts of the origins of the historical novel tend to describe the genre as originating almost entirely with and through Scott's *Waverley* novels. There are also more recent works arguing for Scott as the sole progenitor of the genre; see the respective introductions to Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel: 1840-1880* (1978), Harry Shaw, *Forms of Historical Fiction: Walter Scott and His Successors* (1983) as well as Murray Pittock, ed., *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe* (2006). Recent literary-historical approaches have qualified this assessment, especially in tracing the influences of precursor genres – the gothic, the national tale, the sentimental novel – on the development of historical fiction. See for example Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (1992); Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (1991); Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction* (1994); and Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (1997). At the same time, cross-disciplinary projects addressing Victorian intersections between history and literature have begun to consider the ways in which Scott's historical novels were *more* influential throughout the nineteenth century than previously considered, particularly in terms of their impact on Victorian historiography. See for example Mark Salber Phillips, "Macaulay, Scott, and the Literary Challenge to Historiography" (1989) and Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (2001).

[...] those passions common to men in all stages of society, and which have alike agitated the human heart, whether it throbbed under the steel corslet of the fifteenth century, the brocaded coat of the eighteenth, or the blue frock and white dimity waistcoat of the present day.¹²

Scott wants to direct our attention to the connections and similarities between past and present individual lives. Nevertheless, his historical sensibility requires him to acknowledge the differences as they manifest perceptually, through that most ephemeral of visual expressions: the “brocaded coat” and “blue frock” of changing costume fashions. In the 1829 edition, Scott adds a footnote to the same passage:

Alas! that attire, respectable and gentlemanlike in 1805, or thereabouts, is now as antiquated as the author of *Waverley* has himself become since that period! The reader of fashion will please to fill up the costume with an embroidered waistcoat of purple velvet or silk; and a coat of whatever colour he pleases.¹³

Here, attention shifts to the temporal gap that particularly interests Trilling – that which opens up between the past of the “antiquated” attire worn at the time of writing *Waverley*, and the present reader’s outfit of an “embroidered waistcoat” and a coat “of whatever colour he pleases”. Thus, there are already two historical gaps in play; first, that between the context of the creation of the novel and its historical setting, and, second, the increasingly widening gulf between the novel’s original context and its current reader. And this notion – that “there really is such a thing as the past,” as alien to the present as a medieval “steel corslet” and an eighteenth-century “white dimity waistcoat” – is indeed what Scott helped introduce into literature with *Waverley*.¹⁴ The inevitable temporal gap between the reader and the now “antiquated” author is mirrored, and enriched, by the historical distance that a text set in the past creates from all its readers.

¹² Walter Scott, *Waverley* (1814), ed. Claire Lamont (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1986), 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴ ‘The Sense of the Past’, 176.

Although writers before the French Revolution had been invested in investigating the past, and historical interest can be found in the literature of any given era, it is also clear that their interest rarely involves depicting the visual appearances of the past in a way that emphasize its differences from the present in the way I have described above. As art historian Francis Haskell comments on the historical writings of the eighteenth century:

Almost never, it would appear, has the ‘principle of disjunction’ proposed by Panofsky to describe the contrast, in the art of the Middle Ages, between contemporary styles and antique subject-matter (or the situation in reverse) been so apparent as in these scholarly histories of the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁵

Panofsky’s “principle of disjunction”, which has proved greatly influential to cultural criticism, proposes that one culture can only analyze another once there is sufficient historical distance between the two. Panofsky’s dialectic concept implies that visual perspective was reinvented in the art of the Renaissance because there was sufficient distance – enough time had passed – since Antiquity for artists to be ready to see, absorb and appropriate the discoveries of the Ancients. The Middle Ages provided a chasm or buffer, of sorts, for the Renaissance artists to cross over, back into the art and culture of Antiquity.¹⁶ But even if we accept Panofsky’s rather controversial claims about the Renaissance, it does not explain the lack of representational change that follows. Even a cursory glance at the history of art shows that considered from the specific perspective of historical accuracy, there was next to no change in the representation of the visual appearances of the past, whether Ancient or Biblical, from the Renaissance through to the late eighteenth century. Art had introduced

¹⁵ Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 289.

¹⁶ See Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1972), 84, for a discussion of his term “principle of disjunction”. In his much earlier *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927), Panofsky lays out the ideas of a cultural dialectic of sorts, based in the concept of historical distance as the trigger for reinvention and re-appropriation, which greatly influenced Walter Benjamin and other Marxist critics of the twentieth century.

geometric perspective, but according to Haskell, “[d]uring most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the situation changed only very slowly”:

Famous events from the past were reproduced in a style that was little, if at all, to be distinguished from that of the present. [...] Readers and publishers alike accepted the convention whereby the ungainly costumes and monuments of the Middle Ages, which were constantly being brought to light by new research, would be juxtaposed to illustrated narratives of remote events drawn in a manner that suggested the modern boudoir.¹⁷

Even though artists since the Renaissance had gained sufficient distance, and knowledge, to be able to recreate the past with some accuracy and detail, there appeared to be little interest in doing so – until the period beginning in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

That is not to say that pre-revolutionary writers dealing with the past were not interested in differentiating the present from the past; Chris Van Der Bossche describes British Enlightenment historians as being concerned with presenting a “contrast between an irrational past and a reasonable present.”¹⁸ In the preface to his most recent book, Phillips writes that the danger of dismissing all historical efforts pre-1800 is to create a “genealogy that authorizes a particular strand of historical thought and blesses it with the name of modernity”.¹⁹ This is a warning relevant to my own work; although I believe the innovations in historical thought in nineteenth-century Britain, as they comes across in the literature of the period, were indeed genuinely new and different, my project has no interest in privileging one particular mode of historical discourse over another as in any sense *superior* to other ways of approaching the past. A similar caveat must be issues as regards other disciplines and discourses that concern the past. Although my thesis is not primarily concerned with the reasons *behind* the rapid change in the representations of the past during this time, it is worth emphasizing that literature and the visual arts were by no means the only cultural categories

¹⁷ Haskell, 289.

¹⁸ Chris van der Bossche, ‘Introduction’ to Thomas Carlyle, *Historical Essays*, Chris R. Vanden Bossche, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xxi.

¹⁹ *On Historical Distance*, xii.

to undergo a dramatic change at this time, and consequently any explanation for the change in British historical culture at this time must be sought in more than one area of study and interest. New disciplines like archaeology and sciences devoted to uncovering a deeper planetary past emerged. The spectacular successes of scientific methods of enquiry gained in the natural sciences suggested that they be applied to other fields of knowledge, such as history. Michael I. Carignan shows how “historicism”, implying a study of the rise and fall of systems of thought, and as most famously exemplified in the writings of Marx and Engels, and the Young Hegelian movement in Germany, was a product of this positivist faith in scientific explications of history.²⁰ But academic advances also appeared alongside popular pastimes like museum exhibits and panoramas that sought to profit from the general public’s fascination with all things historical. These pursuits, in a huge variety of fields and across the social spectrum, reflected a new way of thinking about time and history that was as comprehensive as it was simple; the notion that there really is a difference between past and present that acknowledges the historical distance from which we must always view the past from our vantage point in the present – a distance which must be bridged if we are to relate to, and learn from, the past. The Victorian period saw the rise of a particular, and new, sense of the past in Britain – indeed, all over Europe. This sense of the past consists to a large degree of a steadily increasing self-consciousness, or self-awareness, about the distance that exists between past and present.

That self-awareness is sometimes talked about in terms of a sense of modernity and progress. However, if you think of yourself as modern you are (whether explicitly or implicitly) contrasting yourself with something that is not modern, with a culture or mode that is of the past. James Chandler calls the nineteenth century “the first epoch conscious of

²⁰ Michael I. Carignan, ‘Fiction as History or History as Fiction? George Eliot, Hayden White, and Nineteenth-Century Historicism’, *CLIO*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2000), 403.

itself as such”.²¹ And the literature of the nineteenth century shows that a growing awareness of their own era’s modernity led to a desire that is particularly Victorian; to bridge the gap between the past and themselves. My dissertation consequently discusses the ways in which the literature of the nineteenth century sought to imagine historical distance in order to overcome it. Though my thesis only addresses the effects of the interest in historical distance on British literature, it is important to note that its effects were felt all over Europe – and perhaps more so in France than anywhere outside Britain. In ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1863), Charles Baudelaire addresses the relationship of visual appearances to our understanding of the past in the context of the chasm that opened up – the sense of “before and after” – as a result of the French Revolution. He tries to grasp the meaning of history as defining as well as exceeding aesthetic experience: “The past is interesting not only by reason of the beauty which could be distilled from it by those artists for whom it was the present, but also precisely because it is the past, for its historical value.”²² He proceeds to look at a series of fashion plates dating from the French Revolution:

These costumes, which seem laughable to many thoughtless people – people who are grave without true gravity – have a double-natured charm, one both artistic and historical. They are often very beautiful and drawn with wit; but what to me is every bit as important, and what I am happy to find in all, or almost all of them, is the moral and aesthetic feeling of their time. The idea of beauty which man creates for himself imprints itself on his whole attire, crumples or stiffens his dress, rounds off or squares his gesture, and in the long run even ends by subtly penetrating the very features of his face.²³

For Baudelaire, as for Scott, it is the very obstacle of historical distance and difference, evoked by looking at fashion plates, that makes possible the imaginary reconstruction of the

²¹ James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 240.

²² Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life”, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, transl. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

past. As Roland Barthes notes, fashion signifies age.²⁴ Consequently, the specifics of historical details, even those of costume frills, really *matter* if we are to make a sympathetic connection with the past (and thus meet the expectations of nineteenth-century historiography). Indeed, to both authors, fashion – precisely because it is so ephemeral – can convey a “sense of the past” particularly well; it seeks to connect us to the lived moment of the past through insistent reminders that, paradoxically, the only reason that we can only gain historical understanding through pictures of out-of-date clothes is because their moment is indisputably, unattainably gone.

By the time Scott published *Waverley*, history-writing was still considered a branch of literature; it was its literariness which in some ways came to provide its *raison d'être*. Historians like Thomas Carlyle and Thomas Babington Macaulay sought, in different ways, to investigate what a study of the past could mean for the present. Because history was still in a close relationship to literature, the Aristotelian claim of superiority of literature over history to express moral truths could function as a directive for historians as well as for poets. Historiography, partly influenced by Hegel’s call to make historical knowledge “our own, and in so doing [...] make it into something different from what it was before”, tried not only to see the past, but to simultaneously make a moral lesson of the past.²⁵ But what historians often found and recorded – with varying degrees of discomfort – was the relativity of experience, and consequently the radical alterity of the past.

The nineteenth-century’s interest in that alterity was, I suggest, partly rooted in how the period also negotiated the literary status of history-writing, and the historical aspirations of literature. Stephen Bann, seeking to move away from Hayden White’s influential stance on nineteenth-century historiography as a series of literary devices, argues that:

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, transl. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill, 1983), 258.

²⁵ George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 3 vols., trans. E.S. Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 1:3.

History is not simply a literary genre. Or at least since the end of the eighteenth century, it has been inconceivable to classify historical writing as a generic subdivision of literature. History implies an attitude to the past, and what might almost be called a ‘vision’ of the past; and this internalized vision cannot be dissociated from the codes of visibility established and formalized in the Renaissance practice of perspective.²⁶

Though I choose different terms, I address what I consider his crucial question of “codes of visibility” in my second chapter that deals with William Morris’ poetry, and I specifically explore what happens when a Victorian text tries to undo seemingly inescapable forms of Renaissance notions of perspective. For the moment, however, I want to dwell on the first part of Bann’s statement which sets up the idea that nineteenth-century historiography somehow transcends the boundaries of literary form to reflect an “attitude” to the past through a kind of “internalized vision”. Nineteenth-century historiography is not usefully thought of as “simply a literary genre”, and that its “internalized vision” is a central term to be considered if we are to understand what, if any, “attitude to the past” can be extracted from the writings of the nineteenth century. But in order to agree with him, I would like to invert the terms of his argument and suggest that it is precisely the status of the literary in historiography which is at stake in its investment in a “vision” of the past. Through the first half of the nineteenth century, history was the shared property of literature and history-writing, and the most striking sign of their common ownership was the use of visual experience to evoke the past. But it also became an expression of the increasingly tense association between the diverging genres of Literature and History, as their practitioners sought to define and refine their standing in relation to one another. If the early nineteenth century historians perceived a threat from the historical novel to their status as guardians of the past – and responded by trying to adopt the model of representation that imitated literary

²⁶ Stephen Bann, ‘Clio in Part: On Antiquarianism and the Historical Fragment’, *Perspecta*, Vol. 23 (September 1987), 31.

evocations of the past via references to visual experience – then the mid to latter half of the century saw a drastic reversal; after Scott, the historical novel (even though its popularity continued) became a problematic genre plagued by accusations of inaccuracy and lack of historical authority. History-writing, on the other hand, began to hold itself to what might be thought of as academic standards of accountability and began to distance itself from the kind of narrative, “literary” history exemplified by Macaulay and Carlyle. Thus the desire was no longer to beat literature in its own game, but to change the rules entirely. As Linda Orr puts it, “History wanted out of literature, just as literature was going to let it in.”²⁷

Carlyle’s essays pay explicit attention to how the process of converting history into text will include faulty suppositions about the past that are as inevitable as they are dissatisfying.²⁸ To Carlyle and other historians of his generation it was clear that, in order to achieve a moral coherence, the rhetorical structure of history-writing must be a vital part of its purpose. Macaulay wrote in 1828 that “reason and imagination” were the “two rulers” of his own history-writing.²⁹ In order to grasp the meaning of past events, historians had to re-create them actively through literary and artistic means, while readers were to relive those same events through corresponding acts of sympathetic projection.

Elaine Scarry notes that the “verbal arts [...] are almost wholly devoid of *actual* sensory context” unlike a “painting [which] is itself a piece of the visible world.”³⁰ And recreating the past in the reader’s “mind’s eye” means that the text must, in some form, address the leap of imagination between the page – the text – and the image forming in the

²⁷ Linda Orr, ‘The Revenge of History: A History of History’, *New Literary History*, Vol. 18, No 1 (Autumn 1986), 2.

²⁸ See particularly Carlyle’s ‘On History’ (1830) and ‘On History Again’ (1833).

²⁹ Thomas Babington Macaulay, “History” (1828) in *Critical and Historical Essays, Volume 1: The Complete Writings of Lord Macaulay*, ed. Lady Trevelyan, (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 181.

³⁰ Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5. I think this is right on the whole, although we nevertheless use our eyesight to read text and thus the “verbal arts” are not, in the strictest sense, devoid of sensory experience. As I will go on to discuss in relation to William Morris, the use of vision to read is in itself a significant aspect of the relationship between text and image.

reader's mind. Historians of the visual imagination like W.J.T. Mitchell, Stephen Bann, Elaine Scarry, Jonathan Crary and Kate Flint have contributed greatly to our understanding of that process, and of text-image relations in the nineteenth century in particular. Mitchell offers a crucial corrective to the longstanding notion that literature is a temporal and therefore active art form, whereas a work of visual art is a spatial, and thereby atemporal, object which we consume more passively. He shows that most studies of word-image relations since the late eighteenth century have followed Lessing's *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting* (1766), in assuming that there is a "convenient relation" between text and time, as between visual art and space. Any visual or spatial representation in text can only be perceived through language that references the visual in some oblique way; a painting, or statue, can only represent time "indirectly".³¹ My dissertation builds on Mitchell's groundbreaking work but also takes his point further, by arguing that in Victorian works that deal with the past, passages of visual description are in fact the moments when the reader is called on to most actively engage with the text to produce a sense of the past. Unlike a text, which can tell you, and narrate, that a certain period of time has passed, an image must rely on its viewer to produce that sense of historical distance; the viewer must actively engage with the object to imagine the time passed between its creation and the moment it is viewed. By asking us to visualize a detail characteristic of the period under discussion and comparing it

³¹ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), particularly 97-102. As Mitchell explains it, Lessing's theory goes as follows: there are multiple correspondences that connect literature and temporality: reading occurs in time, the signs that are read are spoken or inscribed in a temporal sequence; the events represented occur in time. Similarly, accounts of the reception, medium and content of visual art correspond with spatiality: visual art is a form that represents bodies and their relationships in space, looking at art is an "instantaneous" (or at the very least *not* a temporally sequential or progressive) process; creating visual art is about creating *one* image, rather than a sequence. For Lessing, even genres like narrative painting, which purport to transgress the opposing categories of temporal and visual (or spatial), are found to really be only one or the other; the time sequence of a narrative painting must still be inferred by one, single spatialized scene, and so any temporal effects are at best "indirect" or "secondary" to the central task of painting, which is to convey a representation of spatial, or visual, experience: "The very fact that temporality must be *inferred* in a painting suggests that it cannot be directly represented by the medium in the way that spatial objects can" (100).

to the reader's present, the passage conveys the historical distance between the reader and the past.

By evoking a sense of "seeing", by "looking at" and "into" the past, Victorian historical works thus ask the reader to actively participate in the creation of the relationship between past and present. Rather than stalling or even freezing the progression of time (as seems to be the case when the "story" of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) "pauses a little" to discuss her narrative's relationship to Dutch seventeenth-century paintings) you could even say that visual experience in Victorian historical texts in fact produces time; it simultaneously conveys the passing of time through historical distance, and attempts to connect over and across that distance.³²

Another way to explain this process is to take as an example its extreme opposite: if we accept a model of literary historicity that understands moments of visual experience to be conveyors of time, then the painting at the heart of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) is in fact one of literature's few atemporal portraits. Responding to W.J.T. Mitchell's work, J. Hillis Miller claims that narrative descriptions of paintings and portraits "add the temporal dimension that literal portraits, unless they are like Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, cannot represent because they freeze the subject in an eternal moment of presence/absence."³³ Miller, following Lessing, suggests that ekphrasis, textual descriptions of images, imbue the visual object with a temporality, and a diachronic potential for movement and drive, it lacks on its own. But imagine the wordless, purely visual "literal portrait" which Miller contrasts to the magic at work in *Dorian Gray*'s painting; if the portrait is from a different time than ours (which it almost always is, unless we are in the room with the artist, watching the work emerge and be completed), then the temporal gap between

³² George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), 159.

³³ J. Hillis Miller, "What Do Stories About Pictures Want?", *Critical Inquiry* 34, suppl. (Winter 2008), 75.

ourselves and the portrait can itself create a sense of time passing, and of the past itself. The portrait becomes part of a diachronic process, just as words on the page are in themselves synchronic but when their meaning is deciphered, they can be a part of representing temporal progression. As Mitchell shows us, pictures and texts are both spatio-temporal constructs, at once representing the synchronic and diachronic aspects of an object.

Nevertheless, Lessing and J.H. Miller are both right in that a painting cannot on its own (unlike the narration of a novel) convey either the fact of its age, or that time has passed since its composition. But when a present-day viewer looks at a painting – as when the narrator of *Waverley* asks us to compare the appearances of today's reader with the “antiquated” fashions of the novel's and author's respective pasts – the historical distance between the object and the viewer creates a Trillingsesque “sense of the past” and, in Charles Baudelaire's words, “[w]ithout losing anything of its ghostly attraction, the past [...] become[s] present”.³⁴ Looking at a painting places temporality in the gap between viewer and portrait, like a tightrope that needs both ends to be taut. It is only in the connection to the viewer that the painting or any purely visual artefact can express, convey or contain the passing of time, or the historical distance between past and present. Texts, on the other hand, do not appear to need the reader's participation to express a sense of the past. A temporal progression can be narrated; we can simply be informed, through language, that any period of time, however vast, has passed. The tightrope is strung up between the beginning and end of the text itself, regardless of any prospective reader that wishes to participate outside its boundaries. What that means for a reading of Wilde's text is that every time Dorian looks at the portrait, it has aged, and cannot thus provide an aesthetic of pastness; it cannot function as a visual reminder of all the time that has passed since its creation.

³⁴ Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life”, 2.

My first chapter begins by discussing Thomas Carlyle's use of characters from Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* (1820) to describe what the Middle Ages looked like. In *Past and Present*, the fictive Gurth and Cedric gives Carlyle a reason to describe what he believed the collar of a serf would have looked like (though Scott almost certainly invented this particular detail. In 1859, Dickens based his fictive rendering of revolutionary Paris in *A Tale of Two Cities* on Carlyle's intensely visual account *The French Revolution* published more than two decades earlier. Reading Carlyle next to these two historical novels shows us that British nineteenth-century historiography developed alongside and in tension with the historical novel, where the most conspicuous similarity between the two diverging genres was a preoccupation with the visual appearances of the past. But even though the parallels between the historical novels and Carlyle's history writings are striking, my argument is ultimately invested in the differences between Dickens' novel and Carlyle's work of history. A close-reading of those differences shows a much keener interest in Carlyle's history than in Dickens' novel to dwell on the visually striking differences between past and present – thus, showing Carlyle the historian rather than Dickens the novelist to emphasize and redevelop the literary strategies of historical fiction introduced by Walter Scott.³⁵

³⁵ By reading Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* alongside Carlyle, my first chapter deals to some extent with counter-examples: nineteenth-century works set in the past that are *not* consistently interested in historical distance of the kind I'm foregrounding here. But I also want to mention W.M. Thackeray who, largely, does not form a part of the tradition I have outlined. In historical novels like *Henry Esmond* and *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray occasionally refers to himself as a historian; his introduction of Jos Sedley in *Vanity Fair* – displaying an absurd “dandy costume” – is careful to differentiate Jos' character and appearance from the sort of buffoon his readers could expect to encounter in their own present. But although Thackeray, like Dickens, is a writer extremely interested in the visual, I don't think his images (both metaphoric and actual, in the form of illustrations) are invested, at least not with any regularity, in evoking the visual differences of the past to the present. Perhaps this aspect of Thackeray's style can be most usefully discussed in the context of his stylistic use of irony and satire, and his influences by eighteenth-century writers like Fielding and Richardson. In this way he is not so different from Walter Scott – but as a mid-century writer, Thackeray's similarity to his eighteenth-century predecessors are perhaps more surprising. Edward T. Barnaby suggests that Thackeray uses satire to identify “a *via media* between two extremes”: the subjective histories of Carlyle and the increasingly scientized “objectivity” of Continental historiography (39). See Edward T. Barnaby, ‘Thackeray as Metahistorian, or the Realist *Via Media*’, *CLIO*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Fall 2001), 33-55. I would add that I think Thackeray's historical method is invested in the evocation of literary *genres* above all (the cut Vauxhall episode, the pastiche of eighteenth-century picaresque and satire), calling attention to the shaping process of *narrative* over history – and is thus ultimately more textual than visual in the way it relates to the past.

Next, I turn to William Morris and his early collaborations with the pre-Raphaelite circle of visual artists. Morris is a contradictory figure, known as much for his socialist conviction as for his wallpaper designs. I suggest that his early poetry, such as ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ (1858), helps us understand these pieces of his life’s work as part of a whole centred on the pursuit of a collective mindset. Like his decorative patterns, Morris’ visually rich poetry evokes images of a specific kind: flat, level-plane medieval pictures where the perspectival distance between viewer and viewed remains uncertain. To Morris, the sense of the past expressed in these images represented a non-individuated mindset which came to inform his later visual art, as well as his politics. But it is his poetry, I argue, that shows why historical distance, to Morris and his collaborators, was a call to change the future. ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ seeks to connect an active reader to its past moment, by reminding us that the only reason, paradoxically, that we are able to access the past through a historical description, is because the actual moment is irretrievably gone. Thus, William Morris uses the absence of the visual in his text – the absence of images for the reading eye – to evoke a sense of “pastness” in his poetry. Morris thus uses historical distance to build a connection between reader and text and the instrument he uses is visual experience. The reader, by filling in the visual gaps left by the poem ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, collaborates with the text to evoke images in the mind’s eye of a specific kind: flat, level-plane medieval images where the distance between viewer and viewed is left undetermined. The use of flat images lets the poem suggest what to Morris and the pre-Raphaelites represents a medieval, collective mind set. Morris’ political interest in collectivism can accordingly be found even in his very early poetry, as an insistence on the value of a collaborative aesthetic.

George Eliot’s *Romola* (1861-62), though by no means her only historical novel, is her only full-length fiction set in a time and place far away from her own. It is no coincidence, I believe, that it is also her only novel that was originally published with

specially commissioned illustrations. This dissertation argues, overall, that the visual potency of Victorian texts' relationship to the past resides in the varying degrees of visibility of texts, rather than, as is more customary to suggest, in the relationship *between* texts and images. However, my third chapter explores Eliot's only illustrated novel in order to push at the boundaries of that claim; whereas Phiz' etchings for *A Tale of Two Cities* are not overly concerned with the specifics of the novel's historical setting, Frederick Leighton's wood engravings for *Romola* clearly seek to bring late-medieval Florence alive to the reader. I argue that the genre of romance provides both Eliot and her illustrator with a hybrid model of literary historiography, where historically accurate "realist" details appear alongside a symbolically weighted spectacle of picturesque tableaux of fifteenth-century Florence. I build on critics like Gillian Beer who have shown that romance addresses itself to its own contemporaries to the exclusion of everyone else, including future readers; there exists a crucial gap between the time in which the work was produced, and the present of the current reader. Unlike the other works I discuss, the historical distance between reader and text in *Romola* thus works on the level of genre, and that genre finds historical distance at its core. I further build on Beer's definition to show that romance, as it was used by mid-nineteenth century authors like George Eliot, conveys that distance as a temporal gap not just between the historical subject-matter and modern reader, but between the implied and modern-day reader of the text. *Romola* conveys the detachment of romance throughout the novel as a series of optical illusions and painterly spectacles. Eliot's novel reflects a particularly Victorian perception of romance, characterized by a sense of highly visualized historical distance that remains – unlike other genres of Victorian historical writings – at a remove even when the reader's visual imagination is engaged.

As an art historian and fiction writer invested, to some degree, in aestheticism, Vernon Lee occupies a crucial intersectional point at the end of the century. In her collection

of short stories *Hauntings* (1890), I show that Vernon Lee uses the supernatural as a way to express two oscillating anxieties: firstly, the danger of assuming that a visually imagined connection with the past is possible, and secondly the danger of such a connection succeeding; what would be the consequences of making the art of the past come alive in the present? By the end of the century, the focus on the distance between the past and present had shifted into a mode of relating to history on a broader canvas; writers made connections both to the past and to an imagined future's judgment on their own present moment. In my final chapter, I argue that Lee's work reflects the tension between, on the one hand, the established nineteenth-century tradition of calling on the reader's visual imagination to evoke historical distance as a thrilling gap for the writer and reader to cross together – and, on the other hand, the impulse to ignore historical distance altogether in order that visual art itself can stand out from the narrative, as objects worthy of ahistorical aesthetic contemplation that can resonate into the future. The present, to Lee, is just another step in the temporal sequence of a future observer's past. The result is, I argue, a fictional mode that uses the supernatural to historicize the present rather than the past. When her protagonist in 'Amour Dure' suggests that "[w]e smile at what we choose to call the superstition of the past, forgetting that all our vaunted science of to-day may seem just another superstition to the men of the future."³⁶ Lee reflects a late nineteenth-century shift from imagining visual representations of the past in relation to the present, to a focus on picturing the present in its context of past and future, as just one particular historical moment among many. Though the ideological stance has changed, there is an echo here of Carlyle's contiguous temporality of *Past and Present*; Lee's protagonist goes on to ask: "why should the present be right and the past wrong?"³⁷

³⁶ Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, eds. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2006), 71.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

Thomas Carlyle's assertion that "we do nothing but enact history" illustrates a Victorian commonplace: during the nineteenth century it was felt, for the first time, that a connection to the past was important both on a personal and communal level; that to understand the past would be to add a crucial piece to one's understanding of the condition of one's present life, and in order to do so one must bridge the gap that exists between the present and what has gone before.³⁸ As a result of the successful dissemination of this idea, we have become so accustomed to this idea that we tend to forget it is a nineteenth-century concept rooted in a particular cultural milieu. Indeed, it is ingrained enough that we often try to counter it; works of the past can seem more relevant if they mirror our own present. But I want my thesis to show that one need not come at the expense of the other: we don't read *Middlemarch* just to find out more about 1840s railroad construction, nor to parallel 1870s ideas of female vocation with workplace issues for women now. But when those issues are placed in the context of historical distance – of the thrill of difference between past and present, between the 1840s seen through the prism of the 1870s as perceived by a reader in the 2010s – then something of the pleasure and significance of reading a particularly Victorian text emerges. By evoking the past as visually arresting and different from the present, nineteenth-century literature shows an interest in the past on its own terms, as an era that is defined by the cultural practices of its own time rather than our own. And my dissertation shows that it is the very Victorian obstacle of historical distance, presented across genres through the difference in the looks of past and present, which makes a connection between past and present possible.

³⁸ Thomas Carlyle, 'On History' (1830) in *Historical Writings*, ed. Chris R. Vanden Bossche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 431. I am using the quote to illustrate my point about historical distance and particularity, but Carlyle was also, to some extent, talking about history as a pattern where certain events occur and reoccur.

Chapter 1

The Brass Collar and the Glass Carriage: Thomas Carlyle Looks At the Past

Introduction: Carlyle and the Historical Novel

Writing his account of life in the Middle Ages in *Past and Present* (1843), Thomas Carlyle chooses to open with a description of two medieval lives in particular: that of the Saxon Cedric and his serf Gurth. Carlyle points to Cedric and Gurth as evidence of his argument for the virtues of feudalism: “Gurth’s brass collar did not gall him: Cedric *deserved* to be his Master.”¹ The passage dwells on the shine of the brass as it would have stood out against the green of the forest – as if it were a painting to be evaluated aesthetically for its color palette rather than part of a controversial defense of medieval feudalism.² But as remarkable as we might find Carlyle’s celebration of serfdom, what is perhaps even more extraordinary from a modern perspective is his choice of historical source. Cedric and Gurth are not figures found in a twelfth-century chronicle, but are invented characters out of Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819), a historical novel published a mere twenty-four years earlier.

It is no secret that Carlyle was not generally fond of Scott’s works. There is some suggestion that the dislike was based partly in personal disappointment. It is possible to read Carlyle’s attitude as the product of ill-tempered revenge for perceived slights; as a young man Carlyle had sought contact with his fellow Scotsman several times and, for various reasons

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, Chris R. Vanden Bossche, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 210. Subsequent page references will be given in brackets in the text.

² As Nicholas Mirzoeff points out, *Past and Present* in particular embodies its author’s enormously controversial politics, helping to foster contradictory beliefs long after Carlyle’s own lifetime; while it was allegedly Hitler’s favourite book during his time in the Berlin bunker, it also provided the title to the journal of the British Communist Party History Group in 1952. See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 130.

(mainly due to illness), Scott was unable to keep a single appointment.³ Ten years after the novelist's death, Carlyle's reviewed his biography with characteristic contempt:

[...] Literature *has* other aims than that of harmlessly amusing indolent men, or if Literature have them not, then Literature is a very poor affair [...] Under this head, there is little to be sought or found in the Waverley novels. Not profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for edification, for building up or elevating in any shape! [...] In fact, much of the interest of these Novels results from what may be called contrasts of costume. The phraseology, fashion of arms, of dress and life, belonging to one age, is brought suddenly with singular vividness before the eyes of another. A great effect this; yet by the very nature of it, an altogether temporary one. Consider, brethren, shall we not too one day be antiques, and grow to have as quaint a costume as the rest?"⁴

Whereas Carlyle accused Scott of introducing “contrasts of costume” to the nineteenth-century sense of the past, Georg Lukács thinks of history in literature *before* Scott as “mere costumery”; “[w]hat is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott is precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the *historical peculiarity* of the age.”⁵ However, this chapter seeks to connect the “contrasts of costume” and “mere costumery” – elements that I see as key to Lukács’ sense of “historical particularity” – to Victorian writers’ revolutionary treatment of the difference between past and present, in order to show that the two are inextricably linked. Carlyle worries that the shallow pageantry of “contrasts of costume” turns the reader into a mere observer of the spectacle of the past. Carlyle’s own history-writing establishes a style which is highly literary but also represents a fundamental departure from this “great effect”. Like Scott, he wanted the reader to visualize the past in their mind’s eye, but Carlyle also sought to move the reader to do more than observe: “Like all of his writings,” the editor of his

³ For an account of the personal correspondence (or, rather, the lack thereof) between the two, see Lowell T. Frye, ‘Romancing the Past: Walter Scott and Thomas Carlyle’, *Carlyle Studies Annual: Special Issue Carlyle at 200 II*, ed. Rodger L. Tarr (Normal: Illinois State University Publications, 1996), 37-49.

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, ‘The amoral Scott’, *London and Westminster Review*, Vol. 28 (January 1837), 293-345, reprinted in *Walter Scott: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John O. Hayden (London: Routledge, 1995), 366.

⁵ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1937), transl. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 19, my italics.

historical essays argues, “his histories were rhetorical, meant to move his audience to action, not just to thought.”⁶ By comparing Carlyle’s history writing to the genre of the nineteenth-century historical novel, we can better understand what sort of “action” Carlyle sought to incite in his reader. Furthermore, the comparison serves to question the common critical assumption that Carlyle was not interested in what Vanden Bossche calls “the pastness of the past”, that is the uniqueness of the past “in contrast to other eras” which characterizes so much of nineteenth-century literature’s sense of the past.⁷ As my thesis argues overall, historical distance in nineteenth-century literature functions as a form of engagement; by imagining the looks of the past, the reader is shown the differences between past and present in their most immediately striking form – but they are also encouraged to accept and overcome historical distance by immersing themselves in that past.

With a writer as idiosyncratic as Carlyle, one generalizes at one’s peril; however, I suggest that it is almost impossible to reconcile the particular interest Carlyle takes in the historical distance between past and the present with the notion that he is only interested in the past as a series of useful examples to learn from in the present. As has been noted by many readers and critics, Carlyle’s history-writing presents an idea of contiguous rather than sequential time.⁸ And when we place his intense emphasis on visual experience in the context

⁶ Chris R. Vanden Bossche, ‘Introduction’ to Thomas Carlyle, *Historical Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xxii.

⁷ Chris R. Vanden Bossche, ‘Introduction’ to *Historical Essays*, xxiii. My chapter takes issue with his assertion that Carlyle’s interest in the past was as “apparitions” that “carry messages we ignore at our peril.” While I think this is an important underlying *motivation* of his work, I think it is a reductive account of the *effects* of his history-writing. As I mention in note 9, I also think Vanden Bossche’s ensuing comparison between Carlyle and Hegel contradicts that earlier assertion.

⁸ For examples of works particularly focused on Carlyle as a thinker about time, and more specifically contiguous temporality, see Mark Cummings, *A Disimprisoned Epic: Form and Vision in Carlyle’s French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), John Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), Thomas Schoch, “‘We do Nothing but Enact History’: Thomas Carlyle Stages the Past”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 54, Issue 1 (June 1999), 27-52, and more recently Billie Melman, *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past 1800-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Justin Prystash, “‘The Grand Still Mirror of Eternity’: Temporal Dualism and Subjectification in Carlyle and Dickens”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 38 (2010), 89-106. It is worth noting that some of these critics, particularly Rosenberg and Melman, interpret Carlyle’s view of temporality as partly cyclic, and partly synchronic. I have included them here, because they help to back up my main point,

of this contiguous, or synchronic, temporality, we can better understand that Carlyle not only asks the reader to help re-create the past as a viewer in their mind's eye, but that he calls on the reader to actually look directly *into* the past, as if it can actually be accessed and seen (rather than read) through his text, as if it is happening simultaneously with, and with equal physical reality to, the present. I will return to this point in more detail in my discussion of Part II of *Past and Present* as well as the panoramic account of Paris in *The French Revolution*. But I will say here that for Carlyle, vision – in the form of the “eye of History” – replaces narrative sequence as a structuring principle of his presentation of the past, as if time is a canvas and Carlyle serves as the reader's guide of where to direct our eyes. I believe it is crucial to an understanding of Carlyle's historiography that vision in his works is not treated as a merely metaphoric explanation of imaginative vibrancy or immediacy; whereas to some later nineteenth-century novelists and historians, eyesight became a rather empty trope for the ekphrastic vivacity and color of their accounts of the past; to Carlyle, I argue, the mind's eye can function as an actual agent of physical eyesight. Carlyle's “eye of History” is thus no amused observer like Scott, but it is nevertheless an embodiment of the visual, and emotional, experience to be had if we truly commit to seeing the past.⁹ And we find that it is in fact Scott's deplored “contrasts of costume” that brings an insistence on visual immediacy to the text's historical description – and that also forms the basis for Carlyle's grudging admiration, as his review continues:

which is that the notion of *non-linear time* in Carlyle's writings is, by now, an almost universally accepted assumption upon which critics proceed to add their own refinements and adjustments.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the different meanings of “the eyes of history” as a topos, see Jo Tollebeek, ‘Seeing the Past with the Mind's Eye: The Consecration of the Romantic Historian’ in *CLIO*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Winter 2000), 167-191. Tollebeek situates her argument in the context of blind historians in Germany and France in the early 1800s, but her discussion makes clear that the term was significant overall to historiography in Western Europe and the United States, and for sighted as well as blind historians. The term appears throughout Carlyle's historical writings, from *The French Revolution* to ‘The Early Kings of Norway’ (1875) where the “eye of History” seems to have aged alongside the author; it is described as “much blinded” in the author's fruitless search for reliable chronological information about tenth-century ruler Olav Tryggveson (*Historical Essays*, 375).

[...] these Historical Novels have taught all men this truth, which looks like a truism, and yet was as good as unknown to writers of history and others, till so taught: that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled with living men not by protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions of men.¹⁰

In what can be considered a signature Carlylean move, he has identified the strength and weakness of Scott's historical imagination as one and the same without making the contradiction explicit: Scott makes the past appear "before the eyes" of the present. The descriptive flair of Scott's novels provides a "singular vividness" to the depiction of the past, though the consequence of viewing, and experiencing the past, in such a way is highly problematic for Carlyle; rather than bringing the weight of urgent action, and calls for change, to his own time, Scott's method implies that the present may be one day treated as just another parade of "quaint" attire. The needs of the present may be less pressing than we think, as we one day will be fodder for future readers' delighted engagement with the exotic past. That engagement, however, is paradoxical; Scott's method of conveying the past to a present reader brings the past "alive" before the eyes of the present reader by distinguishing the past from the present by describing what is different: costumes, surfaces, appearances. Scott helped his readers understand that the past was real, and that it was radically different from the present. In Carlyle's words, Scott helped introduce, and reflect, a new emphasis on "the bygone ages of the world" as "actually filled by living men".¹¹

By setting up the past as different from the present, the reader can understand that there are lessons to be learned from the past that cannot be had in the present.¹² However, by

¹⁰ Carlyle, 'The amoral Scott', 367.

¹¹ 'The amoral Scott', 367.

¹² One aspect of Carlyle's work which a study of his relationship to the historical novel brings attention to, I suggest, is his difference in historical purpose from philosophers of history such as Hegel. While I understand Hegel (in broad terms) to be extracting teaching lessons from the past because of its similarities to the present, Carlyle is searching the past for lessons based in difference rather than sameness. For an outline of the differences between Carlylean prophecy and Hegelian philosophy of history, see Chris R. Vanden Bossche, 'Introduction' to Thomas Carlyle, *Historical Essays*, xxii-xxxiii. To Carlyle, the idea of predetermined history leads to believing in "prophecy as an antidote to temporality" (xxiii), whereas Hegel seeks the underlying pattern of history in order to interpret it for the edification of the present. The difference is one between message

focusing on the differences, which appear most prominently on the surfaces of things, the past risks appearing like an exotically interesting but essentially irrelevant curiosity. Here, Carlyle diagnoses his own predicament as a historian: in order to make use of the past as an incentive to change the present, we must access the past imaginatively, through engaging our aesthetic as well as our intellectual faculties, which invariably implies acknowledging the difference between the past and present. “Half the effect, we already perceive,” Carlyle writes in ‘Biography’ about the moment of historical revelation, is that it “depends on the object; on its being real, on its being really seen. The other half will depend on the observer; and the question now is: How are real objects to be *so* seen; on what quality of observing, or of style in describing, does this so intense pictorial power depend?”¹³

Consequently, in order to understand why and how the Middle Ages can matter to the present reader, Carlyle needs the reader to first *see* Gurth’s brass ring. Whether serfs actually wore rings around their neck in the twelfth century is irrelevant; as Ann Rigney points out about nineteenth-century historiography, “historical representation is dependent [...] on the representability of events, and not on their reality as such.”¹⁴ Rigney suggests that Walter Scott’s contemporaries “accepted in principle the novelist’s freedom to invent, at the same time as they considered his novels to be representations of the collective past.”¹⁵ Carlyle seizes on the visual details of *Ivanhoe* to help his readers, in turn, evoke a representation of the Middle Ages which is experientially, if not factually, accurate. The collar helps the reader

and interpretation, or action and analysis, where Carlyle is seeking a *message* in history to carry out and convey, and Hegel is seeking a *pattern* to interpret. It follows that Carlyle needs to spot anomalies in the historical record, which the nineteenth-century historical novel, with its emphasis on the visual appearances of the past, was eager to highlight. Hegel, on the other hand, looks for connections, and parallels to, the present (which Scott’s historical novels were also interested in, to a certain degree). But I argue that what defines the historical consciousness of nineteenth-century British literature was its interest in the details which made the past *different* from the present: only once these details were acknowledged and described could the writer *then* suggest similarities and connections between past and present to her reader.

¹³ Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, Volume III (Boston: James Munroe & Co, 1938), 109.

¹⁴ Ann Rigney, *Imperfect histories: the elusive past and the legacy of romantic historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

imagine what the bonds of feudalism might have *looked like* when imagined by a present-day reader. I argue that, to Carlyle and many of his Victorian readers, imagining the looks of the past corresponds very closely to an understanding what the past was actually *like*.

Carlyle thus acknowledges that there is great power in drawing the reader's eye towards the historical distance that Scott presents – but he also worries that the pageantry only serves to hide the real, unfathomable space produced by that distance, which stretches not just between past and present, but also towards the future. Mark Salber Phillips writes of Carlyle's historical method:

This striking reversal by which the living medieval past thrusts the nineteenth-century present into ghostly futurity expresses a powerful theme of Carlyle's historical imagination. The past, Carlyle repeatedly assures us, so near to being irrecoverable, is at the same time utterly real and present to itself, and whatever slight possibility remains to later ages of seeing into it again must begin by recognizing that it too was once a living world.¹⁶

Like Scott's novels, Carlyle's history-writing emphasizes the distance between the past and the present in order to overcome it. But unlike Scott, Carlyle also considers the past “utterly real and present to itself”, thus suggesting an almost contiguous temporality connecting the present to the past:

This is perhaps the largest lesson Carlyle asks us to contemplate: that there was a past, unlike our own time in almost every way, but just as real to itself as this time is to us. To juxtapose these two realities is not to make them blend into one—that would be giving in to romance—but to force us to stare into the spaces between.¹⁷

I think Phillips' distinction here between “blend[ing]” past and present on the one hand, and juxtaposing the two on the other, is crucial. I consider Carlyle as a writer who draws attention to historical distance rather than “blend” past and present into one, thus setting up some of the fundamental suppositions of my thesis: I argue that the “contrasts of costumes” Carlyle

¹⁶ Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 125.

¹⁷ *On Historical Distance*, 125.

professed to deplore in Scott's writings is a short-hand, of sorts, for a tradition that emerged during the nineteenth century that sought to present the historical distance between past and present through engaging the reader's visual imagination. Carlyle's history-writing helps point to the ways in which the visuality of the past, the "star[ing] at the spaces between" past and present, forces his reader into a confrontation with difference – and an ensuing engagement.¹⁸ I read Carlyle's use of Scott in *Past and Present* alongside *The French Revolution* (1837), a work that also forges a close link with a historical novel: in 1859, Charles Dickens based his rendering of revolutionary Paris in *A Tale of Two Cities* on Carlyle's intensely visual account of France in 1780s and 90s. "After Carlyle," Ian Duncan writes, "the novelists could no longer take history for granted. When they turned to historical fiction, it was with deliberation, as to a virtuoso performance, a show of prowess, in the genre Scott had raised to classical status."¹⁹ I consequently look at what it means for Dickens to write "[a]fter Carlyle" and furthermore suggest that, in order to understand the relationship of the nineteenth-century historical novel to its historiographic source, as seen in Dickens' use of *The French Revolution*, it is necessary to first understand a much less explored connection between Carlyle and nineteenth-century historical fiction: how just fifteen years earlier, a novel like *Ivanhoe* could be deemed suitable as a source text for a historical study such as *Past and Present*.²⁰ I argue that Carlyle's use of Scott, and Dickens' subsequent use of

¹⁸ The term "visuality" was, as Nicholas Mirzoeff points out, coined by Carlyle in *On Heroes* (1841). He also introduced the verb "to visualize" in his writings between 1830-1844. It should be noted that in modern scholarship of nineteenth-century visual culture, Jonathan Crary's use of the term (though he does not mention its origin in Carlyle's work) has been extremely influential; Crary suggests a distinction between "vision" and "visuality" that corresponds, roughly, to a differentiation between physiological and aesthetic perceptions of what can be seen. My project does not focus particularly on the term "visuality" or its Carlylean connotations, but I use it here in order to describe an active engagement, in a text, of the reader's visual imagination. In later sections of this chapter I will discuss the ways physical eyesight relates to "visuality", or seeing in the mind's eye, for Carlyle's reader. For an excellent overview of the history of the term see Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'On Visuality' in *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (April 2006), 53-79.

¹⁹ Ian Duncan, 'The Victorian Novel Emerges 1800-1840', *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, William Baker, ed., (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 7.

²⁰ Though it is often discussed today as a piece of contemporary social criticism, my treatment of *Past and Present* is in some way trying to counter this "trend" by dealing with it entirely in the context of nineteenth-

Carlyle, together help us see the ways that the generic tensions between historiography and the historical novel during the first half of the nineteenth century play out through their relationship to the *looks* of the imagined past. “What picture of French society is here?” Carlyle asks of the written records he draws on to write *The French Revolution*. The answer, for him as well as for Victorian historical writing overall, is the image produced by “the mind that gave it out as some sort of picture.”²¹ This chapter therefore suggests that British nineteenth-century historiography developed alongside and in tension with the historical novel, where the most striking similarity between the two diverging genres was a preoccupation with the visual appearances of the past.

But even though the parallels between the two historical novels and Carlyle’s history writing are striking, my argument ultimately points toward the differences between Dickens’ novel, in particular, and Carlyle’s work of history. My reading suggests a much keener emphasis in Carlyle’s history than in Dickens’ novel on the visually striking differences between past and present – thus, showing Carlyle the historian rather than Dickens the novelist to accentuate and revitalize the highly literary strategies considered as characteristic of the genre of historical fiction introduced by Walter Scott. Across the century, a literary practice developed that evoked the distance between past and present in visual terms, in order to bring the reader into what I call an actively engaged relationship with the text’s evocation

century history-writing. I am aware of the huge significance the contemporary sections of *Past and Present* hold as an influence on Victorian social, political and economic discourses, and if this were an entire dissertation (rather than just one chapter) dealing with Carlyle, I would try to give a much more detailed account of the infinite ways in which the text impacted Victorian culture overall. But one reason why I believe it is crucial to show that Scott’s characters function as the reader’s connection to the Middle Ages in the book is that it highlights how the mind’s eye of Carlyle’s narrator moves so incessantly, and restlessly, between past and present *throughout* the work. It is, I believe, highly problematic to downplay the historical in favour of the modern analysis that Carlyle performs – not only because they are clearly inextricable, but because to Carlyle, I think, the past is important on its own terms, and not merely as a mirror to the present. While only Part II, dealing with Jocelin of Brakelond’s chronicle, is exclusively “set” in the medieval past, the rest of the work is constantly also moving back and forth in time, most notably in the passages that bring up Cedric and Gurth, Robin Hood, Richard Lionheart and other characters featured in *Ivanhoe*.

²¹ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, ed. John Rosenberg (New York: The Modern Library Classics, 2002), 52. All subsequent pages references will be given in brackets within the text.

of the past. My comparison of Carlyle and Dickens, both working in the tradition of Scott, shows that the process of evoking historical distance in the reader's visual imagination is thus not necessarily a feature of the historical novel, or the novel, as such. Instead, I point to the ways in which this convention can be traced across genres and schools throughout nineteenth-century literature.

Carlyle's purpose in drawing on Scott is quite specific; *Ivanhoe* serves as a visual springboard for the reader's active imaginative – and thus in Carlyle's terms “real” – connection with the medieval past. But Carlyle's use of a novel to explain a historical phenomenon is by no means an anomaly in the first half of the Victorian period. In the earliest decades of the nineteenth century, history writing was still considered a branch of literature. A. Dwight Culler, who describes Scott as “primarily responsible for historicizing the imagination of the English people in the nineteenth century”, argues that Victorian culture's relationship to the past was drastically unlike that of earlier generations.²² Up until the nineteenth century, history had been used as a kind of “storehouse of examples for imitation and avoidance”, of teaching lessons to be applied analogically to the present, a historiographic concept which assumes that human nature is ahistorically – if not culturally – universal.²³ Culler suggests that the Victorians adopted a significantly different model. Rather than thinking of the past as a “mirror” or “glass” to reveal their own era, the Victorians learned to define themselves as of an era that defined itself through its divergence from the past: “Their historical consciousness was a mode of self-consciousness, an awareness of the self by means of the other.”²⁴ Whereas before, the past had been a mirror-like blank, which could only come alive when a face from the present appeared to be reflected, the Victorians turned the mirror onto the past itself, seeking to view images and experiences that were

²² A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), vii-viii.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

significant precisely because they showed what could *not* be seen in the present. The literary Romantic movement had placed concepts like “imagination” and “the picturesque” centre stage, which in part allowed for the breakthrough of a historical novel that sought to, in Macaulay’s words, “make the past present” and “call up our ancestors before us”.²⁵ And with the emergence of the historical novel, it seemed “literature” was no longer a category large enough to hold both.²⁶ Partly as a result of the radical changes undergone by historiography in the Romantic period, the nineteenth century also became a period that sought to define itself by its difference from the past.

From Scott to Carlyle

Today’s readers might appreciate the fun verve, while also feel exasperated by the anachronistic details of Scott’s romance, but it is perhaps difficult for us to quite appreciate just how influential and even revered *Ivanhoe* was throughout the nineteenth century. In 1837, there was an entire tournament staged at Eglinton Castle in Ayrshire to commemorate the novel. Thackeray produced a typically tongue-in-cheek sequel to the novel in 1850, though his version was only the most well-known of countless literary sequels and adaptations of Scott’s story. By the end of the nineteenth century, Scott’s novel had spawned

²⁵ Thomas Babington Macaulay, ‘Hallam’ (September 1828), *Critical and Historical Essays, Volume 1: The Complete Writings of Lord Macaulay*, ed. Lady Trevelyan (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 239.

²⁶ For the most influential account of the formal properties of the texts important to this development, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Ann Rigney provides a more Culture Studies-oriented study of the origins of nineteenth-century historical thought in *Imperfect histories: The elusive past and the legacy of romantic historicism* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2001). Billie Melman’s book *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past 1800-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) treats Carlyle and his nineteenth-century English successors as “illustrators” of history across various media. Recently, Brian Hamnett, in *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Representations of Reality in History and Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), argues that the European nineteenth-century historical novel can be seen as an expression of the divergence between the two disciplines of literature and philosophy, where history ultimately forged a path to create its own discipline. Though I agree with Hamnett that the historical novel was essential to the development of history as a discipline, I think Mark Phillips is right to argue that the developmental pressures to transform on the branch of literature that was to become History were more internal than we have previously thought, and thus the dramatic changes wrought within literature were exactly that: *literary*, rather than philosophically driven, changes.

thirty-seven stage adaptations; plays, musicals and even burlesques.²⁷ As was the case with Scott's historical novels in general, nineteenth-century awareness of the book was extraordinarily widespread, spanning the upstairs-downstairs divide of urban mansions, as well as reaching rural readers via travelling stage productions and circulating libraries.

In 'History' (1828), Macaulay compares Scott's historical novels to the "beautifully painted window" at Lincoln Cathedral which was made "by an apprentice out of the pieces of glass which had been rejected by his master":

Sir Walter Scott, in the same manner, has used those fragments of truth which historians have scornfully thrown behind them in a manner which may well excite their envy. He has constituted out of their gleanings works which, even considered as histories, are scarcely less valuable than theirs. But a truly great historian would reclaim those materials which the novelist has appropriated.²⁸

Macaulay presents the relationship between historian and historical novelist as that between master and apprentice, the former's arrogance leading to the ascension of the latter. The only way to "reclaim" the "pieces of glass" from Scott and the historical novel is to offer readers an imaginative experience of the past to rival that of the novels. He seeks – in a manner which would have been foreign to eighteenth-century historians –

...[t]o make the past present, to bring the distant near [...] to call up our ancestors before us with all their peculiarities of language, manners, and garb, to show us over their houses, to seat us at their tables, to rummage their old-fashioned wardrobes, to explain the uses of their ponderous furniture, these parts of the duty which properly belongs to the historian have been appropriated by the historical novelist.²⁹

Scott himself prefigures the use of his fiction as an appropriate historical source in his review of two collections of traditional English poetry and ballads in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1806.

²⁷ See Chapters 3 and 4 in Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memories on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) for statistics as well as a detailed account of the cultural and popular impact of *Ivanhoe* on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-American culture.

²⁸ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'History', *The Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 47 (May 1828), 365, re-printed in *Walter Scott: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John O. Hayden (London: Routledge, 1995), 309.

²⁹ Macaulay, 'Hallam,' 239-240.

Here, Scott suggests that literature offers not only historians, but a general readership, the opportunity to gather a different kind of knowledge about the past:

To form a just idea of our ancient history, we cannot help thinking that these works of fancy should be read along with the labours of the professed historian. The one teaches what our ancestors thought; how they lived; upon what motives they acted, and what language they spoke; and having attained this intimate knowledge of their sentiments, manners and habits, we are certainly better prepared to learn from the other the actual particulars of their annals.³⁰

Scott's list of "sentiments, manners and habits" mirrors the requirements outlined by Macaulay in his quest for history-writing to rival the historical novel in exciting the reader's imaginative connection with the past. It suggests that knowledge of the past must necessarily consist of two aspects: one prompted by the "intimate knowledge" provided by "works of fancy", and the other a more official account taken from the "annals" and archives of the historical record. Early nineteenth-century historiography sought for History to try to imagine, and convey, the experiential quality of past lives, as closely as possible. And if the task of history-writing was one of imaginative identification with the past – of "rummage[ing] the old-fashioned wardrobes" of past lives – then the historians of Macaulay's generation, in the first three or so decades of the nineteenth century, were certainly right to regard the historical novel, and its foremost progenitor Scott, as competition. Throughout the century, Scott and his historical novels continued to cast a long shadow. Even the great realists of the 1840s can, as Ian Duncan suggests, be read as performing "successful renovations of Scott's historical romances". He argues that "these examples show the profound reach of Scott's historicism, beyond the accumulation of antiquarian detail and beyond any particular ideological agenda."³¹ So great, in fact, was

³⁰ Walter Scott, 'Review', *The Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 7 (1806), 368, quoted in Jane Millgate, *Walter Scott: The Making of the Novelist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 8.

³¹ Ian Duncan, 'The Victorian Novel Emerges 1800-1840' 8. Duncan is particularly referring here to Thackeray, the Brontës and Elizabeth Gaskell.

Scott's influence during the Victorian era, that not only novelists, but the historians of the age felt compelled to respond, in some form, to his fiction.³²

Mark Phillips takes issue with the work of scholars of intellectual history that assume the challenges to historical writing in the early nineteenth century were posed from *outside* literature, in the fields of science, politics and philosophy.³³ He argues that Macaulay's desire to "make the past present, to bring the distant near"; to reclaim the glimmering fragments of the historical record that can help a reader imagine the past, points to the rise of fiction – and, more particularly, the historical novel – as the reason for British history-writing's transformation in the early nineteenth century. History-writing was taking its cues from literature, which was changing quickly and dramatically at the same time. Whereas eighteenth-century historians like Hume and Gibbons had presented the past as a teaching lesson via "detached judgement", Macaulay and Carlyle's generation sought to "appeal to the imagination", with "the evocation of the past" as their central purpose.³⁴ Early nineteenth-century historiography thus found itself in a closed loop; it fought to compete with historical novels, because it tried to be more *like* novels. No wonder, then, that they were beginning to feel outdistanced by the explosive growth of popularity of the writings of Scott.

More than Macaulay, Phillips continues, it was Carlyle who actually adopted Scott's methods, in that he "tried to shift the grounds of historiography from action to experience. [...] [W]ith his crowded scenes and broken, urgent rhythms, he carried his readers into the confusions and passions of the moment. Calm judgment, ironic distance, and clarity of

³² Apart from these Macaulay and Carlyle, Scott's direct influence on historians is probably most evident in French historian Augustin Thierry's *Histoire de la conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normands* (Paris, 1825), where the twelfth century is depicted almost entirely as Scott presents it in his novel, serf collars and all. Thierry was a wholehearted fan: "My admiration for this great writer was profound; it grew as I contrasted his wonderful comprehension of the past with the petty erudition of the most celebrated historians. I greeted the appearance of "Ivanhoe" with transports of great enthusiasm." Quoted in G.P. Gooch, *History and the Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed (London: Longmans Green & Co, 1952), 162.

³³ See Mark Phillips, 'Macaulay, Scott and the Literary Challenge to Historiography,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Jan-March 1989), 117-133.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

outline-the ideals of centuries of classicizing historians-were thrown aside in favor of what Michelet would call history as ‘resurrection’.³⁵ Ian Duncan, on the other hand, attributes Carlyle’s vividly experiential evocation of the past due to his *resistance* to Scott and to the linear temporality found in the historical novel: “Scott’s influence was as decisive for historiography as for historical fiction [...] If Macaulay cheerfully acknowledged a debt to Scott, Thomas Carlyle’s early masterpieces enact a strenuous refusal of Scott’s cultural authority, amounting to a rejection of the novel [...] as such, in the decade when popular imitations thronged the market.”³⁶

Because of Carlyle’s expressed ambivalence to the historical novel, Duncan’s conclusion is reasonable. But whereas Carlyle no doubt was unsympathetic to Scott’s novelistic tendency to provide narrative closure to actual historical processes, I suggest that Carlyle’s relationship to Scott also helps to show us that the qualities of historical experience in British nineteenth-century literature should not be determined according to generic boundaries.³⁷ Carlyle’s at-best ambivalent attitude to Scott as a writer and historian is psychologically fascinating but it does not negate his employment of Scott’s mode of presenting the past to a reader, and it should not prevent us taking seriously his use of Gurth and Cedric. In the same year as the publication of *Past and Present*, Scott’s son-in-law wrote to Carlyle, urging him to “give us a Romance of the Middle Ages, or of any age. [...] You have more the power of putting life into the dry bones than anybody but Scott, and nothing

³⁵ Ibid., 133.

³⁶ Ian Duncan, ‘The Victorian Novel Emerges 1800-1840’, 6.

³⁷ It is interesting to note that the examples I have offered of writings on *Past and Present*, spanning from 1843 to 2004, though they obviously represent a vanishingly small proportion of what is out there, nevertheless accurately reflects what I feel is an extraordinarily common feature of Carlyle criticism, which is a tendency of the critic or reviewer to take up Carlyle’s abundant use of visual metaphors into their own vocabulary when attempting to describe and/or define elements of his thoughts. This is a particularly striking feature even in the instances of critical writing which leaves out commentary on his visual prose, or even of his style altogether, from their discussion.

could be more unlike his method of doing it than yours.”³⁸ Five years had passed since Carlyle’s ambivalent review of Scott’s biography, and more than ten years since the novelist’s death. We do not know if Carlyle ever replied, or how he felt about being appointed a worthy successor to a writer he appeared to have deemed mediocre. But it did not prevent his appropriation of the novelist’s characters to convey what his contemporaries had to learn from the Middle Ages:

Gurth born thrall of Cedric the Saxon has been greatly pitied by Dryasdust and others. Gurth with the brass collar round his neck, tending Cedric’s pigs in the glades of the wood, is not what I call an exemplar of human felicity: but Gurth, with the sky above him, with the free air and tinted bosage and umbrage round him, and in him at least the certainty of supper and social lodging when he came home; Gurth to me seems happy, in comparison with many a Lancashire and Buckinghamshire man, of these days, not born thrall of anybody! Gurth’s brass collar did not gall him: Cedric *deserved* to be his Master. The pigs were Cedric’s, but Gurth too would get his parings of them. Gurth had the inexpressible satisfaction of feeling himself related indissolubly, though in a rude brass-collar way, to his fellow-mortals in this Earth. He had superiors, inferiors, equals.— Gurth is now ‘emancipated’ long since; has what we call ‘Liberty.’ Liberty, I am told, is a Divine thing. Liberty when it becomes the ‘Liberty to die by starvation’ is not so divine! (210)

Here, I suggest, we can see how Carlyle puts into practice what Rosemary Jann has called British nineteenth-century historiography’s “didactic use of the imaginary real”.³⁹ The brass collar worn by Gurth – and, by implication, commonly worn by serfs in the Middle Ages – cannot be found in any medieval account of feudal practices, but is a product of Scott’s invention.⁴⁰ But if we were to travel back in time and come across Gurth and Cedric in the forest, we would immediately be able to identify their relationship by *looking* at that one part

³⁸ Andrew Lang, *The life and letters of John Gibson Lockhart*, ed. Andrew Lang (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1897), 229.

³⁹ Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), xii.

⁴⁰ See William W. Heist, ‘The Collars of Gurth and Wamba’, *The Review of English Studies, New Series*, Vol. 4, No. 16 (Oct 1953), 361-364. Heist speculates that Scott may have been inspired to invent the medieval English serf collar out his knowledge of 17th and 18th century Scottish clan practices that, in some ways, resembled medieval serfdom in their structure. Some sources, he argues, indicate that, in the early 18th century, indentured labourers in Scotland may have worn collars, or bracelets, inscribed with their master’s clan symbol or name, and Scott may have known of such practices through his earlier research into Scottish history. Heist also points out that it is clear from contemporary 19th century reactions to Scott’s novel that the collar was recognised by a number of English historians (if not by Augustin Thierry, or the reading public at large) to be an inspired fiction.

of Gurth's costume. No wonder, then, that Carlyle focuses his defence of serfdom on the brass collar worn by Gurth in deference to his master; it is the external, visual expression of what Carlyle considered a satisfying order of social interrelations in the medieval period. The brass collar is not a mere picturesque detail, but a piece of vital information about medieval life, conveyed visually to the reader who tries to evoke the scene Carlyle conjures. I argue that for Carlyle's purposes the historical truth of Cedric and Gurth's relationship is absolute, and is in no way diminished by its fictional origins; in the original manuscript of *Past and Present*, Carlyle spells the name Cerdic, which is the correct medieval spelling of Cedric, a variant only introduced into use in English by the popularity of *Ivanhoe*.⁴¹ The fact that *Ivanhoe* provides a constant, if gentle, critique of feudalism is irrelevant to Carlyle as he makes use of Scott's characters – as is Scott's sole responsibility for the invention of the brass collar as a salient feature of medieval serfdom.

This is the past, “[n]ot as dead tradition, but as palpable presence, the past stood before us”, as Carlyle described the Scott's engagement with the past in his review essay.⁴² Unlike Dryasdust – and with Scott's help – Carlyle is able to *picture* the past, and is therefore capable of relating to it, and put it to use in his own present. Dr. Jonas Dryasdust is another of Scott's inventions, a fictitious antiquarian set up by the novelist as the straw man of the historiographic arguments featured in the prefaces to several of his historical novels, including *Ivanhoe*. Throughout his historical writings, Carlyle frequently alludes to Dryasdust as the author of dry and pedantic historical works and here he employs the figure to counter his own interpretation of feudal relations, and what he believes we can learn from them in the present.⁴³ To Carlyle, he also appears to represent the historical scholars of Scott's era whom

⁴¹ See Chris R. Vanden Bossche, Notes to *Past and Present*, 331.

⁴² ‘The amoral Scott’, *Walter Scott: The Critical Heritage*, 353.

⁴³ See Chris Vanden Bossche, Notes to *Past and Present*, 367-368, for an overview of the specific instances in which Carlyle refers to Dryasdust. They are numerous and spread across his historical essays, sketches and letters. Particularly notable is the instance which forms the whole first chapter of *Cromwell*: ‘Anti-Dryasdust’.

Carlyle considers misguided in their zeal for antiquarian facts, thus denying the reader any real imaginative connection to the era they study. Dryasdust's lack of visual engagement with the past leads, for Carlyle, to serious flaws of historical judgement, such as the temptation to feel pity for Gurth's servitude. Scott – and the genre of the historical novel which he helped shape – function at certain moments as an “Anti-Dryasdust” to Carlyle, in the sense that Scott's texts provoke the reader's imaginative curiosity rather than send us back into the archives searching for verification of our historical knowledge. Scott's ability to “put life into the dry bones” of the past allows Carlyle to picture the Middle Ages – the “air and tinted bosage and umbrage” surrounding Gurth as he stands “with the sky above him” in the forest in which Scott's opening chapter situates him. This shows how Carlyle's use of *Ivanhoe* depends exactly on Scott's deplored talent for conjuring the “costumes” of the past, and in particular their effective “contrast” to the present.

But what of Scott's original description of Cedric and Gurth – how does the visual experience of that text compare when read alongside Carlyle's ideologically forceful interpretation? The Anglo-Saxon serf appears not alongside his master, as Carlyle seems to describe him from memory, but is presented in the opening pages of the first chapter next to the jester Wamba, whose “fantastical” costume, Scott is careful to point out, contrasts sharply with Gurth's “garment [...] of the simplest form imaginable.”⁴⁴ The two men are introduced, simply, as “two human figures which completed [the] landscape,” and as “partaking, in dress and appearance, of that wild and rustic character which belonged to the woodlands of the West-Riding of Yorkshire at that early period” (18). The time period has already been introduced to the reader via a detailed description of the imprints the passage of time has made on the forested landscape; the oaks which have “witnessed perhaps the stately march of

⁴⁴ Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, ed. Graham Tulloch (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 19, 18. Subsequent page references will be given in brackets in the text.

the Roman soldiery”, a glade which “seemed formerly to have been dedicated to the rites of Druidical superstition” due to its incomplete circle of standing stones, some of which were dislodged “probably by the zeal of some convert to Christianity” (17-18). Not only is the reader asked to observe the forest as if she were there in person, as a kind of sightseeing time-traveller, but she is also immediately reminded of the deep historicity of the visual experience which could, potentially, be had by those two “human figures” that complete our picture of the medieval landscape. Presumably, Gurth and Wamba are unaware of the signs of the past scattered throughout their surroundings, but they are nevertheless there to be imagined by the reader, with the help of Scott’s narrating description. As Maurice Samuels suggests, “Scott’s verbal images function like visual ones; they make the reader see the past.”⁴⁵ Just like my contemporaries, the narrator implies, these two medieval men are surrounded by the rich leavings of the past, if they would only know where to look. They don’t, of course, but the reader is given a chance to, through the picture the scene outlines of the landscape and of the men who belong in it:

One part of [Gurth’s] dress only remains, but it is too remarkable to be suppressed; it was a brass ring, resembling a dog’s collar, but without any opening, and soldered fast round his neck, so loose as to form no impediment to his breathing, yet so tight as to be incapable of being removed, excepting by the use of the file. On this singular gorget was engraved in Saxon characters, an inscription of the following purport: – “Gurth, the son of Beowolf, is the born thrall of Cedric of Rotherwood.” (18-19)

To Gurth, the exploits of Romans and Druids, even the adventures of his father’s namesake some hundred years back, are only part of a misty imagined past, whereas his collar – however remarkable a source of exotic unfamiliarity for Scott’s contemporary reader – is a visual, external symbol of his unremarkable twelfth-century present. The visual evocation of the past thus functions here on two levels: it makes twelfth-century England come alive in the

⁴⁵ Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 166.

reader's mind, and it also helps to endow the twelfth century with a deep history of its own, thus placing it in a closer relationship with the present. We are reminded of Carlyle's anxiety about the merciless progress of history, where one day we will ourselves "be antiques, and grow to have as quaint a costume as the rest."⁴⁶ In Scott, however, the nineteenth-century unease with historical relativity manifests itself as a happily productive shortening of historical distance: by relating to Gurth's present, we are making the kinds of connections with his place and time that he cannot perform himself in relation his own past. Marilyn Orr reads Scott's layering of pasts upon landscapes as a Bakhtinian chronotope:

In each of his historical novels, Scott must find the precise situation and circumstances that allow readers to appreciate both the similarity and the difference of the past. For a writer of Scott's profoundly chronotopical imagination, achieving this balance of familiarity and strangeness is always a matter of coordinating the temporal and spatial dimensions of his setting, and a major aspect of his contribution to the development of the novel is his turning the landscape from background into context. This process involves giving the landscape a temporal dimension – the specificity of a particular historical moment – while giving to time a specific topographical concreteness.⁴⁷

The landscape behind the novel's characters in the opening of *Ivanhoe* certainly functions as more than "background". The glimpses of the past offered to the reader – if not to the medieval serfs themselves – through remnants and ruins surrounding Gurth and Wamba are the result of providing the visual description of a landscape with a "temporal dimension". But rather than showing us "a particular historical moment", as Orr claims, Scott layers the scene with *multiple* pasts. Thus he ensures the reader's active participation in evoking the image of the past; without our own, more knowledgeable eyes surveying the view of Gurth and Wamba in the woods, whole strata of historical relations would be left uncovered.

⁴⁶ 'The amoral Scott', *Walter Scott: The Critical Heritage*, 366.

⁴⁷ Marilyn Orr, "'Almost Under the Immediate Eye': Framing Displacement" in J.H. Alexander and David Hewitt, eds., *Scott in Carnival: Selected Papers From the Fourth International Scott Conference Edinburgh 1991* (Aberdeen: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1993), 61.

Carlyle shares with Scott an emphasis on the visually experiential quality of the past: Scott offers a suitably suggestive model of how that experience can be brought to the reader, and to Carlyle the truth of that model is not related in any way to the literary qualities of Scott's oeuvre. Thus Carlyle's sources, whether they be a genuine medieval chronicler like Jocelin of Brakelond or a near-contemporary historical novelist like Scott, are chosen through their adherence to a particularly Carlylean model of aesthetic recreation. And I think it is worth noting that, in *Past and Present*, Carlyle references Gurth and Cedric no less than eight times, and not just within the medieval sections of Part II, but spread out evenly throughout the four parts of the book.

The tendency to view Carlyle's depiction of the past as a teaching example for his present risks ignoring the striking, and important, stylistic similarities between Carlyle's history-writing and the nineteenth-century historical novel, both of which present explicit departures from the tendency of earlier writers to treat the past as an unproblematic reflection of the present: the emphasis on visual experience shared by Carlyle and Scott is there to *contrast* the past with, rather than offer a mirror to, the reader's own lived moment. To some extent, this error has been addressed by more recent critics. Marylu Hill, for example, has shown that it is the visual force of Carlyle's style which defines *Past and Present* as a work of both fictional and factual history: "through the vision of a 'magical speculum', Carlyle hoped to integrate 'Dryasdust' historical facts with the experiential quality of romance, encouraging the reader to 'feel' the past even while preserving a necessary awareness of this 'strange dualistic life of ours' caught between 'Memory and Oblivion'."⁴⁸ However, through her emphasis on Carlyle's integration of fact and fiction, Hill may be offering an apology for his method which he himself would have found somewhat unnecessary; to Carlyle, the

⁴⁸ Marilu Hill, "'The Magical Speculum': Vision and Truth in Carlyle's Early Histories", *The Carlyles at Home and Abroad*, David R. Sorensen and Rodger L. Tarr, eds., (London: Ashgate, 2004), 83.

“experiential” truth of a successfully evoked historical moment trumps Hill’s twenty-first century notion of “historical facts” at every turn. There is little suggestion in Carlyle’s work that his cherished “Facts” are actually contradictory with his use of the tools provided to him by Scott’s historical romances.⁴⁹ In another borrowing from *Ivanhoe*, Carlyle asks us to imagine the green “Lincoln coats” worn by “a Robin Hood, a William Scarlet and others” (69). These are the sorts of details which, he believes, can make history “be[come] real” and “really seen”; “some little, and perhaps to appearance accidental, feature is present; a light-gleam, which instantaneously *excites* the mind, and urges it to complete the picture, and evolve the meaning thereof for itself.”⁵⁰ The moment of historical awareness is for Carlyle an ocular revelation, triggered by a detail of appearance, which spans the distance of past and present, and paradoxically, through its sheer unfamiliarity, manages to bridge the gap between the imagined past and the present-day reader.⁵¹

I have already discussed the problems inherent in reading the appearance of Gurth and Cedric in *Past and Present* as a “mirror” which transforms the past from a historically specific moment to a neatly fitting teaching example for the Victorian present. However, we must also acknowledge that the idea of a mirror is offered repeatedly by Carlyle himself: not in relation to Scott’s characters, but through Jocelin of Brakelond who, unlike Cedric and

⁴⁹ See *Past and Present* for example 45, 49 and 51.

⁵⁰ Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, Volume III, 109.

⁵¹ There is of course a large and important discourse devoted to thinking through the problem of what happens when the past, due to its incomprehensible nature, appears “unrepresentable” (particularly in relation to the collective traumas of twentieth-century history such as the Holocaust); see for example Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime’ in *Artforum* (April 1982), 64-69. This is not, I would argue, a problem that is quite applicable to the distinctively visual emphasis of nineteenth-century historical works that is the subject here. Writers like Scott and Carlyle were certainly aware of the challenges posed by representing that which is no longer here to be seen, but – and this applies particularly to Carlyle, I believe – their reservations about representation were based in a typically nineteenth-century awareness of the profound gap produced by the passing of time between the past and present. Contemporary discourse on “unrepresentability” tends to focus on the problem of giving an account of past atrocities, and they are problematic not really because a long time has passed since they occurred, but because they are in some way unimaginably horrific, regardless of whether they happened last week or two hundred years ago. The nineteenth-century writers under review in this chapter are indeed concerned with the unrepresentability of the past, but rather than any difficulty in encountering the specific *events* of the past, it is the particular flavour of pastness, the unattainability of the past *per se* which forms the basis of whatever anxiety they express on the subject.

Gurth, was a real person who left behind a written chronicle of his existence. But in spite of the wealth of information the writer has available to him, Carlyle's mirror on to the Middle Ages has great trouble revealing itself: "It must be owned, the good Jocelin, spite of his beautiful childlike character, is but an altogether imperfect 'mirror' of these old-world things! (47)" In contrast to Cedric and Gurth, Jocelin can be verified and claimed for one of Carlyle's beloved "Facts":

There, we say is the grand peculiarity; the immeasurable one; distinguishing, to a really infinite degree, the poorest historical Fact from all Fiction whatsoever. Fiction, 'Imagination', 'Imaginative Poetry', &c. &c., except as the vehicle for truth, or *fact* of some sort, – which surely a man should first try various other ways of vehiculating, and conveying safe, – what is it? Let the Minerva and other Presses respond! (49)

The watchword for Carlyle's particular idea of veracity was indeed "fact": "The ever-surprising circumstance this, That it is a *fact* and no dream, that we see it there, and gaze into the very eyes of it!" (66). "It" is referring to the past, to the daily life of the twelfth-century monk order at St Edmundsbury. He insists that "this England of the Year 1200 was no chimerical vacuity or dreamland, peopled with mere vaporous Fantasms" (47). In order for the past to contain meaning – to be revealed as a truthful prophecy – it must also be a "*fact*" in italics. And the only way to tell apart the fact rather from the chimeric fiction, is to look, to "gaze into the very eyes of it". "[I]t" refers to a pair of eyes of history that appears imbued with self-conscious powers of vision, perceiving not only itself, but us who are watching it. Later he promises that if we, his readers, will indeed see "these antique figures [of Jocelin's chronicle] and their life-method, face to face" (52). The result, he assures us, is astonishing: "we look into a pair of eyes deep as our own, imaging our own, but all unconscious of us; to whom we for the time become as spirits and invisible!" (53). Again, the eyes that meet ours hold our reflection, as wherein Jocelin's "soft-smiling eyes we see so well our *own* shadow": the past is there for us to see ourselves, but it is also a "fact", as real as we consider ourselves. Perhaps it is even more real, since we only appear as spirits and shadows to these people.

John D. Rosenberg has observed that in Carlyle's most "charged" moments the "actual and the spectral change places" in order to convey the illusory quality of sequential, progressive time.⁵² I agree with Rosenberg, though would add that it is perhaps more a matter of equating spectral with actual, or questioning the category of spectral altogether, rather than performing an exchange.

Past and present are thus contemporary not because of the vivacity or immediacy that Carlyle's pictorial language evokes, but because the vision of the past *must* be as solid as our every-day observation of the present-day; it must achieve the status of "fact" in order to be a reliable prophecy. That implies two suppositions underpinning *Past and Present* that are interrelated: firstly, that the solidity or reality of the past is entirely dependent on looking, and being looked at, and secondly that in Carlyle's temporal order past and present are, when seen as a "fact", co-existent and contiguous. Of the present-day ruin of the abbey, he states that "Life lies buried there!" (52). The use of "Life" here comes close to suggesting that the monks have been buried alive. But to Carlyle, the monks are simultaneously dead and alive, since chronological time only exists in language: "There are three Tenses, Tempora, or Times; and there is one Eternity" he asserts before quoting a favourite line from *The Tempest*: "We are such stuff as Dreams are made of!" adding a Carlylean exclamation mark for good measure (67). "Tenses" is a grammatical construction, which seeks to, but cannot entirely control the visions his text express shortly thereafter: "What a historical picture, glowing visible, as St. Edmund's Shrine by night, after Seven long Centuries or so!" (67). If we travel to St. Edmund's Shrine today and look at it, Carlyle suggests, the past is there "glowing visible", because the past and the present of the Shrine are only artificial divisions of

⁵² John D. Rosenberg, *Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 21.

“Eternity” constructed by the “Tenses”. The meaning, or the prophecy, contained in the idea of the Shrine is unchangeable and as “solid” as the vision that sees it.

I think the call to actually look at it with our physical eyes is important, and distinct from Carlyle’s use of visual metaphors: “Will not the reader peep with us into this singular *camera lucida*, where an extinct species, though fitfully, can still be seen alive?” (47). The “*camera lucida*” metaphor can only provide a vague notion of an “extinct species” through an intermittent and flickering picture. Figural vision thus divides the past from the present by reminding the reader of the distance between the twelfth century and our own era. But even it does so, it hints at the co-existence of all times and ages that is only accessible through eyesight: paradoxically, the extinct species “can still be seen alive.” Whereas the account of Gurth is confidently descriptive, giving us details evoked from the past such as the collar made of brass, and the “tinted boscage and umbrage” surrounding him, Carlyle is much more hesitant when introducing Jocelin’s “extremely foreign” notebook: “the ideas, life-furniture, whole workings and ways of this worthy Jocelin; covered deeper than Pompeii with the lava-ashes and inarticulate wreck of seven hundred years!”(44) How can Jocelin be “covered deeper than Pompeii” if he is, temporally, located approximately a thousand years closer to us in time than the remains of the Roman city? One answer could be that Carlyle is trying to make the text of Jocelin’s chronicle come alive, which is for this particular historian a much taller order than excavating the sights – paintings and mummified bodies – of a buried city.⁵³ But why? What is the wreck that covers Jocelin from the present view? A not-so-subtle clue is given in the very first few pages of the chapter on St Edmundsbury:

Alas, what mountains of dead ashes, wreck and burnt bones, does assiduous Pedantry dig up from the Past Time, and name it History, and Philosophy of History; till, as we say, the human soul sinks wearied and bewildered; till the Past Time seems all one

⁵³ At the time of writing *Past and Present*, some of the bodies and art work of Pompeii were still in the process of being fully excavated. The excavations of earlier centuries had found but chosen to re-bury almost all the paintings and decorations later found, on account of their erotic motifs. For an account of the excavations in the 18th and 19th centuries, see Joanne Berry, *The Complete Pompeii* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007).

infinite grey void, without sun, stars, hearth-fires, or candle-light; dim offensive dust-whirlwinds filling universal Nature; and over your Historical Library, it is as if all the Titans had written for themselves: dry rubbish shot here! (51)

It turns out that the problem is not historical distance as such, but the contents that this distance has been filled with. There are problems with the presentation of Jocelin's text which the representation of Walter Scott's fictional medieval characters do not encounter. Almost as soon as Jocelin is introduced to the reader, the inconvenient figure of "Giant Pedantry" (50) barges in, carrying books of obscure learning and facts with names like *Monasticon* and Dugdale, which muddle the vision of the Abbey, of Jocelin himself, until all we see is the wreckage of the written history displayed in between, the information supplied by all the Dryasdusts who have inserted themselves as interpreters of the past, of "Monks, Monastery, Belfries, Carucates and all! (51)" In his surveillance of the wreckage of the past, there is an almost Benjaminian suspicion of diachronic progress – temporal and otherwise – but with a significant difference of emphasis; unlike Benjamin, Carlyle does not necessarily doubt our ability to evoke the past due to its catastrophic nature.⁵⁴ The resurrection of Jocelin is absolutely possible, but only under certain, and specified, conditions.

Jocelin "looks on us so clear and cheery, and in his neighbourly eyes we see so well our *own* shadow" (47). But even though Jocelin himself is clear and real, the distance between him and us is vast – in fact, it has "dwarfed him now to an extreme degree". The light that shines through the mirror of history is "feeble, intermittent, and requires the intensest kindest inspection; otherwise it will disclose a mere vacant haze" (47). As he famously established more in one of his earliest works on history, text transforms the past

⁵⁴ See footnote 50 for a longer account of what I consider the broad differences between Carlyle's historiography and modern thinkers (including Benjamin) who focus on the unrepresentability of the past.

into narrative: “Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*”.⁵⁵ The reservations against the powers of narrative to distort history are of course by no means unique to Carlyle. But what is unusual in his lumping together of text and historical structure, is the implication that *time itself* is distorted and misrepresented as linear rather than as solid or contiguous.

Consequently, Carlyle is setting up the language of history, as incorporating a vast and linear but somehow useless expanse of time. In the “metaphor, trope, or the like” (130), he locates the most particularly constructed feature of text: “The coldest word was once a glowing new metaphor, of bold questionable originality” (130). The distance of time, between the past of the “glowing new metaphor” and the chill of its tired figurative use today, is almost dizzying in the vastness of its scope. But even when it was new, the metaphor, though bold, was of “questionable originality”, because the speaker or the poet who first thought of its “adoptable” and “intelligible” (131) uses, simply performed an act of re-naming that which already exists. It is worth putting what I consider to be Carlyle’s suspicion of metaphor in relation to Hegel’s objective for historiography: “to grasp the knowledge which is already existing, to make it our own, and in so doing [...] we make it into something different from what it was before.”⁵⁶ In Carlyle’s view, Hegel’s displacement of the chaos of the raw materials of “solid” events, with a linear narrative that makes “our own” and “something different” of the “knowledge” that is already there, would be considered a distortion of time itself. It is equivalent to the defective capability of visual language, of visual metaphor (rather than vision as a product of eyesight) to convey the truth and prophetic meaning of history.

⁵⁵ Thomas Carlyle, ‘On History’ (1830) in *Historical Essays*, ed. Chris R. Vanden Bossche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 8. Subsequent page references to this essay will be given in brackets in the text.

⁵⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 3 vols., trans. E.S. Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), Vol. 1, 3.

Thus *Past and Present* presents metaphor – paradoxically, of course – as a metaphor itself, standing in for two of his text’s failings: firstly, that it is a text at all rather than an image, and secondly, that it must at times rely on a metaphoric rather than literal vision of the past. The conditions of text make it impossible, as he states in ‘On History’, to convey an accurate sense of the relationship between past and present: “the things done were not a series”, as the ordering of vision into a textual format might suggest, “but a group” (7). The past and the present are only two terms describing the same “solid” image. Thus, to Carlyle a recent historical novel can be as valid a source of medieval life as a twelfth-century chronicle; what matters is the picture evoked, the vivacity of the image determining how genuine the reader’s connection to the past can be. The powerful image of Gurth’s brass ring evokes the past visually, and thus overcomes – if only momentarily – the metaphorical status of the language of historical representation. The account of Gurth and Cedric calls on Carlyle’s reader to become a viewer, and a *co-creator* of the past.

Considered this way, Carlyle’s use of Scott that, despite his resistance to the historical novel, participated in the transformation of historiography undergone in the first half of the nineteenth century which took after Scott’s emphasis on a Romantic evocation of the past “in the mind’s eye”. He strenuously rejected the linear narrative structure which contemporary historiography and Scott’s novels had in common, but simultaneously valorised their insistence that the past must be *seen* to be believed. *Ivanhoe*’s depiction of the past, of Gurth’s brass ring, is anachronistic, as is Carlyle’s use of its characters to convey his own picture of the Middle Ages, and that is entirely appropriate to the project of *Past and Present*; as Elliot L. Gilbert remarks of Carlyle’s idiosyncratic use of sources, their purpose is not to bring an accurate rendition of the past into the present, but to show time to be a “solid image” viewed by the reader and text together: “at the moment we encounter men and women well rendered in the pages of books or historical documents they become fully and in reality our

contemporaries, coeval with us in an eternal present, not merely like us, but *co-existent* with us.”⁵⁷ Scott, whose visual evocation of the Middle Ages in *Ivanhoe* relies on the reader’s acceptance that the past is radically, and exotically different from the present, allows Carlyle an escape from the metaphoric status of text as a placeholder, or sign, of what can be seen. Maurice Samuels may be overstating the case somewhat when he argues that Scott’s novels “collapse the distinction between the visual and the verbal by forcing words to act like natural signs”.⁵⁸ But I nevertheless suggest that Scott provides Carlyle with the sort of experiential, or aesthetic, relation to the past that could free his history-writing from the structural limitations of conventional narrative, or linear, history. If *Ivanhoe* helps us see that Carlyle thinks of the past to be closer to an image than a text, that explains not only the resistance within his historical texts to metaphor (the textual imitation of an image, reminding the reader of its status as the perpetual second best), but also to various forms of narrative ordering, which is what the next section will treat in detail through an investigation into the relationship between Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* and the novel which it inspired: Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*.

From Carlyle to Dickens

Though they are both known today for the colour and vivacity of their evocation of the Middle Ages, Carlyle was – like Scott – temperamentally and habitually accustomed to exploring the more recent past. In *The French Revolution*, published six years before *Past and Present*, he composed a book-length study of events which were just about within living memory for some of his readers, depicting a “group” (to use his term from ‘On History’) of confusing and violent events which had not yet been refined into a commonly accepted

⁵⁷ Elliot L. Gilbert, “‘A Wondrous Contiguity’: Anachronism in Carlyle’s Prophecy and Art”, *PMLA*, Vol. 87, Issue 3 (May 1972), 435.

⁵⁸ Samuels, *The Spectacular Past*, 165.

narrative. In many ways, the disorder of the revolutionary years was a subject which aptly suited Carlyle's attraction to the chaos of the colourfully raw materials of "solid" events. Ian Duncan describes the texts as a "radically antinovelistic, anti-Enlightenment, epic, and romantic mode of history."⁵⁹

However, it is important to note that the subject matter presents immediate difficulties to a writer with an aversion to linear narrative. With his medieval chapter of *Past and Present*, Carlyle allows his text to roam, imagining looking at any of the glimpses of medieval life which Scott and Jocelin's texts inspire. But in *The French Revolution* the author's task is much more defined, and restrained, by a single unitary subject at hand, as becomes evident just from the comparison between titles; *Past and Present* can sweep across centuries and subjects – and does so, insistently – whereas *The French Revolution* encapsulates and circles in on a particular cluster of events, tied tightly together by temporal as well as geographic proximity. And at first glance, *The French Revolution* does seem to be a very different book from *Past and Present*. It follows a narrative wherein the three volumes roughly coincide with the threefold schema of cause, effect and resolution. The first part, 'The Bastille', deals with the impotent monarchy's inability to restrain the forces of anarchy, whereas the second, 'The Constitution', though it continues the story of royal weakness, also outlines how new kinds of government that sprung up in its place, such as constitutionalism, prove equally ineffective in harnessing the power of revolution. Finally, the third volume 'The Guillotine' links the end of the monarchy with the implosion and end of the revolution itself. Ana Buckett blames Carlyle's bombastic style for the text's moral and structural simplicity: "Indeed Carlyle does leave very little room in his history for the unpredictable or the irregular. A rigidly defined pattern of imagery [...] neatly assembles the main forces of the Revolution into a matrix of simple black-and-white oppositions; the narrative proceeds

⁵⁹ Ian Duncan, 'The Victorian Novel Emerges, 1800-1840', 6.

through a series of confrontations between these contrasting elements.”⁶⁰ Compared to the restless wandering across aspects of England’s social ills of *Past and Present*, and in and out of the Middle Ages, *The French Revolution* appears to tell a diachronically structured plot arriving at a fairly clear moral conclusion; a degenerate monarchy provokes hungry forces of anarchy to rise up, but once those forces are given the ultimate meal through the deaths of the royal family, they no longer have a goal and – in a powerful stroke of dramatic irony – die out themselves, alongside the *ancien régime* they rose to conquer. The revolution was a horrific, but perhaps necessary, purging of inbred weakness and cruelty, and it can be argued that Carlyle presents the story as a teaching example to England, that needs to nurture its aristocracy to find the kind of benevolently paternalistic, but muscular, leadership which will prevent the same development playing out at home.

This is certainly the socio-political story, I believe, that Charles Dickens derives from the text and subsequently presents in fictional terms in *A Tale of Two Cities*. In the Preface to his novel, he writes: “It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr Carlyle’s wonderful book.”⁶¹ It does not, however, take a particularly attentive reader of either Carlyle or Dickens to see beyond the “philosophy” – if we take the term to imply a set of morally edifying conclusions based off a coherently proposed problem – of *The French Revolution*’s three-volume division into cause, effect and resolution. The remainder of this chapter will show the ways in which Carlyle’s “solid”, synchronic image of the past, as it is evoked in *Past and Present* and *The French Revolution*, is transformed in *A Tale of Two Cities* into a *series* of pictures of the past upon which the

⁶⁰ Ana Buckett, ‘History as Verbal Construct: Strategies of Composition and Rhetoric in the Histories of the French Revolution by Carlyle, Scott, and Mignet’ in *Revista canaria de estudios ingleses*, Vol. 9, (Nov 1984), 64.

⁶¹ Charles Dickens, ‘Preface,’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. George Woodcock (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), 29. Subsequent page references will be given in brackets in the text.

novelist can project his story. While visual experience is certainly the shared path both writers take to re-create the past, the emerging divide between Literature and History as separate projects produces, in Dickens' novel, a definitive departure from the historical writings of the first half of the nineteenth century, exemplified here by Scott's historical romance and its influence on Carlyle. Defending the style of *The French Revolution* in a letter to J.S. Mill, Carlyle writes:

The common English mode of writing has to do with what I call hearsay of things; and the great business for me, in which alone I feel any comfort, is recording the presence, bodily concrete coloured presence of things...⁶²

What he is defending, in typically martyred fashion, is his antidote to the modern "Phantasmagories, and loud-gibbering Spectral Realities" that, according to Nicholas Mirzoeff's reading of Carlyle, "dominated popular history as it happened, locked into an unseeing present."⁶³ Rather than spectres or illusions, Carlyle offers a "visualized history", a history made itself into "concrete coloured presence of things."⁶⁴

Carlyle's history may have seemed philosophically coherent to Dickens, but the difficulty of the text – particularly to a modern reader – can appear overwhelming, and is largely due to its fragmentary and at times emblematic organisation, full of clashes of formal elements and genres. But it helps the reader, I suggest, if we consider the organising structure of the book to be the wandering "mind's eye", the eye of History of Carlyle's narrator figure. Structuring the book through an eye, rather than a plot, often makes reading feel as if we are being presented with a large picture upon which we must simultaneously gaze from a distance and up close:

⁶² 'Letter to John Stuart Mill 22nd July 1836' in *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling and Robert Browning*, ed. Alexander Carlyle (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923), 134. This letter was written before the accidental destruction of Carlyle's original manuscript by – depending on which source you believe – either Mill's maid or Mill himself. Famously, Carlyle then proceeded to reconstruct the entire text from notes and memory.

⁶³ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 140, quoting *The French Revolution*, 160.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

On Monday night, the Twentieth of June, 1791, about eleven o'clock, there is many a hackney-coach, and glass coach (*carrosse de remise*), still rumbling, or at rest, on the streets of Paris. But of all glass-coaches, we recommend this to thee, o Reader, which stands drawn up in the Rue de l'Echelle, hard by the Carrousel and outgate of the Tuileries; in the Rue de l'Echelle that then was; "opposite Ronsin the saddler's door," as if waiting for a fare there! (380)

The author is there to guide our eyes to the one important glass coach amongst the many, which turns out to be waiting for the Queen in her failed flight attempt from Paris. However, there is a sense here, echoed many times throughout the text, that the reader's eye could have roamed further ; there is a playfulness in the hyperbolic address to "thee, o Reader" which is complimented by the lack of authority in merely *recommending*, rather than requesting, our attention to this particular carriage. History, as a "solid image", is too vast a vista for us to know it as a whole, and so we must constantly make choices, and focus our attention on details or particular angles in turn. Leading in to this passage Carlyle ponders the world of the past in just these terms: "These are of the Phenomena, or visual Appearances, of this wide-working terrestrial world: which truly is all phenomenal, what they call spectral; and never rests at any moment; one never at any moment can know why" (380). The reader needs the historian to guide our attention, so that we can look in the right direction, but the reverse is equally true: the author requires the reader's attention so that we can even sense in which direction he is pointing, or else his power of evocation is lost. As Mark Cummings points out, "*The French Revolution*, like many late eighteenth century and [early] nineteenth century texts, enlists its reader as co-worker and co-creator, sharing in the author's imaginative difficulties. [The reader] is invited by the deliberate difficulty of the text to help actively in the recreation of the author's vision."⁶⁵ The difficulty, I would add, is produced in particular by the structure of the narrative, which organises itself around selected moments of sight

⁶⁵ Mark Cummings, *A Disimprisoned Epic: Form and Vision in Carlyle's French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 3.

rather than by the forward-drive of relating the historical events. The reader is exhaustingly expected to co-create, as Cummings says, the entire image of the past, by following and responding to the author's visual suggestions. In other words, Carlyle is not asking the reader to imagine what *happened* next, but rather *where to look* next.

A great many commentators have remarked on the panoramic scope of *The French Revolution's* numerous and chaotically urban crowd scenes. Rebecca Stott describes "Carlyle's revolutionary crowds" as "thunderous, swelling and apocalyptic seas in the city", a metaphor which Dickens takes up repeatedly in his novel, most prominently in the climactic account of the storming of the Bastille.⁶⁶ Billie Melman suggests that the newly invented panorama,⁶⁷ serving as a visual model for narrative history, offers Carlyle "a framework for historical thought that made it possible to make sense of the grand-scale, dramatic events that made the past", and in particular those that coincided with the Victorians' "growing obsession with urban crowds" which of course fuelled the popular British imagining of the revolutionary years.⁶⁸ *The French Revolution*, accordingly, reflects the masses of revolutionary Paris as a non-individuated sea of bodies, over where the narrator must maintain a bird's-eye view to retain any sort of control over the progress of the narrative, as in the procession of the Estates-General in 1789:

Huge Paris, in all conceivable and inconceivable vehicles, is pouring itself forth; from each Town and Village come subsidiary rills: Versailles is a very sea of men. But above all, from the Church of St. Louis to the Church of Notre-Dame: one vast suspended-billow of Life, – with *spray* scattered even to the chimney-tops! For on chimney-tops too, as over the roofs, and up thitherwards on every lamp-iron, signpost, breakneck coign of vantage, sits patriotic Courage; and every window bursts with patriotic Beauty: [...] Yes, friends, ye may sit and look: bodily or in thought, all France, and all Europe, may sit and look; for it is a day like few others. (112-113)

⁶⁶ Rebecca Stott, 'Thomas Carlyle and the Crowd: revolution, geology and the convulsive 'nature' of time', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 4, Issue 4 (1999), 5.

⁶⁷ For the early 19th century invention and popular availability of the panorama, see Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, transl. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997). For panoramas in Britain and especially in London see 101-135.

⁶⁸ Billie Melman, *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past, 1800-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 68.

The “sea of men” is making Paris burst at the seams and the only way to give an account of the way it looks is to look from above, high enough that we can even see what the chimney-tops look like. And to Carlyle, ever the champion of hyperbole, to describe the crowds themselves as a “vast suspended billow of Life” is not enough; suddenly, the readers are addressed – “friends” – and implicated in the scene together with the broiling masses: we “sit and look” together with the author, from a higher and higher vantage point until the map of the entire Europe is visible, as if Carlyle’s narrator was showing us the sight from an improbably high-flying hot air balloon. Even personified Courage shares the collective high anxiety, as she sits on each “breakneck coign of vantage” available above the city. However, as Melman also points out, it would be misleading to assume that Carlyle’s account of the Revolution follows the panorama’s imperative of distance: “characteristically the panoramic mode of looking and representation, in urban entertainment, architecture, and even in literature, kept a distance from human subjects, their problems, and culture.”⁶⁹ This does not reflect Carlyle’s method, for which we literally must take a closer look. For coupled with the dizzying heights of panoramic perspective, the author also points out worthwhile details spotted on way, details that are only visible to a much closer view: lamp-irons, sign-posts and even glimpses into open windows. Melman comments on the “extraordinary density of details” present in Carlyle’s text, which I read as a continual call for the reader to view a certain section or segment of the panoramic picture in close-up. “Carlyle”, Melman concludes, “humanized the panoramic look.”⁷⁰ Carlyle’s panorama has a strong moral force driving its swooping in and out of the urban scenes. Cumming suggests that to Carlyle, “[t]he literary act of the reading [*The French Revolution*] is contiguous with the moral act of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 72.

reading the universe, since both involve the decoding and recreation, in word or action, of the meaning embodied in a system of signs, the book or the world.”⁷¹ I therefore suggest that it is the visual vantage point of the narrator – the eye of History – which provides the organising logic, and the “system of signs”, of the book that the reader should help to decode and subsequently recreate. It is this structure that, while it lends astonishing illumination to each “close-up” of the image-like text, also makes the book such a dauntingly dense and convoluted read.

Like many mid-century historical novels, *A Tale of Two Cities* certainly continues the interest in the “contrasts of costume” of past and present found in *Ivanhoe* and Carlyle’s reinterpretation in *Past and Present*, but it does not evoke the visual details of the past to explicitly remind the reader of the differences between the past and the present. Instead, the “picturesque” elements added by Dickens to Carlyle’s interpretation of the revolutionary years provide a backdrop, a much more indirect invocation of historical distance, upon which the spectacle of the past can be performed to the reader. Whereas historical texts of the first half of the nineteenth century represent the past visually as a gesture of historical knowledge and authority, to show their status as unassailable guides to the past, the mid to late nineteenth-century historical novel relies on an external historical authority, and often tends to wear its debt to “real” history-writing on its sleeve. Of course, I’m not by any means suggesting that Dickens, or other mid-century British authors, did no primary research when writing their historical novels. In his introduction to *A Tale*, George Woodcock mentions the sources we know for certain that Dickens consulted outside Carlyle, Jules Michelet and other historians’ secondary works; they include the tax tables of pre-revolutionary France, Rousseau’s writings, and Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris*, a French 1780s equivalent of sorts to Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (Introduction, 12). Even allowing for

⁷¹ Cummings, *A Disimprisoned Epic*, 5.

the hyperbole he shared with Carlyle, Dickens was clearly an avid and careful reader of sources; he claimed to have read *The French Revolution* five hundred times by the time he began *A Tale*.⁷² What I'm trying to point out, rather, is a shift in attitude from the novel as a vehicle of historical knowledge to the novel as the *fictional* representation of what historians claimed for *fact*; whereas Scott assumed, alongside Carlyle, responsibility for influencing what his readers' perception of what the past was really like (no matter how many inaccuracies and inventions his prefaces cheerfully acknowledged), Dickens is very consciously offering a *literary* adaptation of Carlyle's work of *history*, and is not presenting the historical novel as a vehicle of historical veracity or as a source of information about the past. This has important consequences also for his rendering of the past; as I will show, Dickens' strong sense of the visual when evoking the eighteenth century does not extend to the differences between past and present that defines the historical distance evoked in Carlyle's work. Instead, I argue that Dickens sets up the past as surprisingly blank canvas on which he can paint figures equally at home in his present as in the 1780s and 90s.

While Scott's prefaces talk about the ways in which his archival work informs his novels (and even invents an antiquarian researcher with whom to spar), *A Tale* pays tribute to a historian who has already performed all the primary research required of its author. The distinction is crucial to an understanding of Carlyle's texts; placing him in the context of Scott and Dickens helps us see that Carlyle's eye of History is, in a sense, an eye of Literary Historiography, in distinction to both the scientific historiography emerging in Germany and France, and to the Victorian historical novel. The result of Scott's efforts can be regarded simultaneously as history and fiction, whereas Dickens' novel adds "picturesque" elements to the already authenticated history of Carlyle.

⁷² See Charles Dickens, *Letters*, eds. Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), Vol. 6, 452.

Dickens' novel shares Carlyle's resistance to the dehumanising distance of perspective, even as it echoes the historians' obsession with the threat of the revolutionary crowds of Paris. However, I argue that Dickens prioritises the novelistic rather than historical task of his book. Unlike Scott, who participated in the early nineteenth-century shared project between Literature and History of uncovering and making the past visible, Dickens is deliberately shaping a historical novel, a fiction, out of the historical text of Carlyle's *The French Revolution*. Dickens employs an eye that confidently separates out the fictional foreground from historical background. The effect, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, is of a more generalized visual immediacy, where past and present are not clearly delineated, as in Scott, or made part of the same chaotically contiguous canvas, as in Carlyle. Instead, Dickens evokes the visual qualities of revolutionary Paris as part of the specific looks of the world of a Dickens novel; historical particularity has become novelistic and stylistic particularity, historical distance turned into a mirror.

One way in which this shift becomes particularly noticeable is the way that *A Tale* absorbs and then transforms Carlyle's crowd scenes into set pieces of narrative mastery; while in Carlyle's text the eye of History zooms in and out of the urban masses, the seas of people, in order to guide the reader's own eye to a different detail on the historical canvas, Dickens shifts between the panoramic scope of the crowds and the events on street-level in order to better narrate what happens next in the plot. His build-up to the storming of the Bastille reflects Carlyle's "[r]aging multitudes" (150) who wreak havoc while crying for arms; "But see" and "Look also" (154, 153) the narrator continues to almost plead with the reader, as if we are to lose sight of one another in the crowd unless we stay attentive to where he is pointing us next. Dickens responds by imagining a "forest of naked arms that struggled in the air like shrivelled branches of trees in a winter wind: all the fingers convulsively clutching at every weapon or semblance of a weapon that was thrown up from the depths

below, no matter how far off” (244). The effect is intensely Carlylean in its hellish evocation of masses turned into nature, not the sea this time but a forest of (inexplicably naked) body parts. In between scenes of Defarge ordering his men to follow him to the Bastille, we continue to watch as the “raging sea” of people move as one towards the prison. Eventually it becomes clear that we are following Defarge because he is looking for something very important to the personal plot of the novel’s main characters: a statement by Dr Manette explaining the reasons for his imprisonment. Once that search is given up, we are directed by Madame Defarge to “See, there’s my husband!” and “See Defarge!”, as he stands with his followers in “the howling universe of passion and contention” that is the Bastille.

Unlike Carlyle with his recommendation of which glass carriage to follow, Dickens is not uncovering pieces of the past that are all simultaneously happening before the reader’s eyes, but utilising the past as a background upon which to set his visually striking series of close-up pictures. Whereas Carlyle presents a scene from the past, Dickens offers a historical setting as the backdrop of a certain event.⁷³ The events foregrounded, against the dramatic background of the revolutionary years in Dickens are largely driven by the plot of a small group of individuals who try to made headway against the tide of historical change. Carlyle intersperses his panoramic view of the crowd with close-ups of Camille Desmoulins, of Besenval, and the Tuileries Garden. He does not follow the movement of the people as they march toward the Bastille, instead his eye of History roams back and forth, looking for details which should be investigated more closely, and sometimes zooming out to survey the scene from a supernatural distance: “A European metropolitan City hurled suddenly forth from its own combinations and arrangements; to crash tumultuously together, seeking new” (151). Scott Dransfield describes the effect as painful: “the narrative forces on [the reader] living

⁷³ The difference in effect can be likened to a painting by Goya set alongside a series of pictures by Eugene Delacroix or William Holman Hunt.

experience.”⁷⁴ The city, crowd, the individual: the storming of the Bastille is happening simultaneously, “together” on all levels, and what matters to the reader should not be what happens next, but what the eye can absorb and interpret next. In *A Tale*, on the other hand, the march is, while equally chaotic, filled with narrative purpose. We don’t stop on the way to see what people, or the city, look like, but to catch up with characters like Defarge who are driving the plot of Dickens’ characters’ fate onwards. The progress towards the Bastille culminates in a call to look at Defarge, because he has earned it: he structures our experience of the storming of the prison through the search for Manette’s private papers. Once this aspect of the plot is presented, we can step back into the crowd and watch, as the Defarges decapitate a prison guard.

A Tale constantly reminds us of the value of the familial, personal, and individual, sometimes in the face of overwhelmingly sweeping historical forces. Many critics, when comparing the two texts, emphasise Dickens’ gentler optimism, his “more trenchant belief in the power of the individual to withstand what time (or, more grandly, [Carlyle’s] Time) can do to us.”⁷⁵ But it is clear from the very opening of the first chapter, ‘The Period’, that the individual is up against an almost crushingly powerful sweep of Time, of history. He famously informs the reader of the large, superhuman contradictions that will drive the plot:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness [...] in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (35)

The narrator stands (sardonically) helpless before the magnitude of divides that ‘The Period’ presents. The “noisiest authorities” of both past and present dictate that the narrator only give

⁷⁴ Scott Dransfield, ‘History, hysteria, and the revolutionary subject in Thomas Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*’ in *Prose Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1999), 66.

⁷⁵ Gardiner, John. “Dickens and the Uses of History” in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, David Paroissien, ed (Blackwell Publishing, 2008). Blackwell Reference Online. Accessed 30 July 2010.
http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405130974_chunk_g978140513097419

us the big picture at such a remove that only Darkness and Light are visible, and though Dickens' adherence to such a circumscribed view is clearly ironic, and only temporary, his text is nevertheless helpless before the enormity of scale that the task of depicting the revolutionary years presents. But directly after the "authorities" have established their dominant interpretation of what can and cannot be shown of the past, the text zooms in, not only down to the level of human interaction but into a close-up of the features of individual faces:

There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France. (35)

Of course, the text has not lost its dialectic drive; one could argue that the description of the royal faces is only there to function emblematically as a low-stakes parody of the national "superlative degree of comparison"; there is also the irresistible temptation, to this author, to perform a sing-songy parallelism through the mirroring of the two phrases. But the question of what a person looks like is too frequently posed in this novel for this idea not to be explored on its own terms, not only as an emblem of contrasts, but as an attempt to understand how the individual relates to large-scale historical events. I argue that Dickens addresses this through the problem of what people look like, and more specifically how we see individual faces. But in this novel, visual specificity of appearances – though it is at the heart of the plot, and even, I would suggest, central to Dickens' historical imagination – proves continually elusive. The monarchs' faces return to book-end the opening chapter:

All these things, and a thousand like them, came to pass in and close upon the dear old year one-thousand seven hundred and seventy-five. Environed by them, while the Woodman and the Farmer worked unheeded, those two of the large jaws, and those other two of the plain and the fair faces, trod with stir enough, and carried their divine rights with a high hand. (37)

The absurd amount of power carried by these couples, by four royal people in two nations, is highlighted through the collapse of the previous attempt at distinguishing them as visually specific: by now, the contrast even between the fair and the plain faces has been elided and all we are left with are two jaws and two faces, and so we know trouble lies ahead. In contrast, Manette's return to his life which follows, the recalled name, is dependent on the recalled face. Kamilla Elliott points out that in *A Tale*, "the face is to the body as the proper noun is to the common noun: it denotes a particular, as opposed to generic, identity."⁷⁶

This is, I think, a response in part to the sort of historical fiction Scott introduced and helped shape; his famously blank heroes are passive non-contributors to the events of their turbulent eras that they somehow yet remain involved with, and their individual appearances are unremarkable and rarely described in detail – which, in Scott's novels, stands out considering the wealth of detail lavished on secondary characters like Gurth, Wamba and Cedric. Apart from the serfs, Cedric, Rowena, Rebecca, Isaac and Brian de Bois-Guilbert all receive lengthy descriptions which are bound up in their historical as well as individual specificity; the author even deliberates over whether Rowena's hair is curled due to fashion or nature (44), Isaac's face is discussed as an example of the moral investment in appearances in the Middle Ages, when Semitic features were viewed with distaste (47), and Cedric, Rebecca and de Bois-Guilbert receive similarly extensive visual introductions (34-35, 71-72 and 24). For a third of the novel, Wilfred of Ivanhoe appears only in a series of nondescript disguises, variously referred to as a Palmer or Pilgrim's dress, until his head is uncovered after he is wounded in a tournament in Chapter XII: "When the helmet was removed, the well-formed yet sunburned features of a young man of twenty-five were seen, amidst a profusion of short fair hair. His countenance was as pale as death, and marked in one or two

⁷⁶ Kamilla Elliott, 'Face Value in *A Tale of Two Cities*' in *Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities and the French Revolution*, eds. Colin Jones, Josephine McDonagh and Jon Mee (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 88.

places with streaks of blood” (116-117). The only real recognisable feature we learn of in this sparse passage is that Ivanhoe’s hair is short and light, and his face is never remarked on again.

There is a similar displacement of recognizable individuality in *A Tale*, where the plot even hinges on Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton’s ability to appear like each other. But Carton’s appearance evokes his type, his fate, rather than his era. Even at the end, at the moment of his death, we are not given more detail than that Carton looks peaceful, “sublime and prophetic” (403) – no wonder then, that the deception of the swap has worked. Daniel Stout comments on this moment that “[a] scene that seems designed to confirm the importance of the personal concludes by asserting its irrelevance.”⁷⁷

The constant mirroring, most prevalent in Darnley and Carton, but also in other pairs like Pross and Madame Defarge, and of course in the continual comparisons between England and France, seems to imply that a high level of visual specificity of detail is required – you cannot, after all, provide a mirror image without a certain accuracy of reflection. “Reading *A Tale of Two Cities* calls for double vision,” says Paul Davis, “for England is implicit in the images of France, characters divide within themselves or mirror others, the present lingers as a palimpsest in the annals of the past.”⁷⁸ In Scott, the empty centre is justified as a medium through which the reader can become an observer of the past, and of the historical spectacle presented on the page. In Dickens, that blank at the centre is thematised and almost pathologised as an inability to pinpoint visual characteristics. The spectacle of “contrasts of costume” that surrounds the anonymous hero in Scott, and which he conjures up in the reader’s mind’s eye to tell his historical story, transforms in Carlyle into an

⁷⁷ Daniel Stout, ‘Nothing Personal: The Decapitation of Character in *A Tale of Two Cities*’ in *Novel*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2007), 29.

⁷⁸ Paul Davis, ‘A Tale of Two Cities’, *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, Accessed 30 July 2010. http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405130974_chunk_g978140513097433

unrelenting eye of History which evokes scenes simultaneously from afar and up close, so that we don't miss any of the details which provide our imaginative connection to the past. But in Dickens, those details, the "contrasts of costume" are now no longer the heart of the story, but provide the background to the real story, as the individuals of his narrative act out their lives in the foreground, with the curiously imprecise panorama of history playing out behind them. And so without the constant display of the visual specificity of the past to *drive* his historical imagination, Dickens must instead structure the text through its absence. His novel performs the shift, subtle but insistent, in expectations and the relationship to the reader between the historical imagination of the early and mid nineteenth century: from evoking history visually, to evoking the events of a novel against a vivid historical background.

Reading Carlyle next to *Ivanhoe* and *A Tale of Two Cities* also shows us that historical distance is a feature of nineteenth-century literature across genres. Through the first half of the nineteenth century, history was the shared property of literature and history-writing, and the most striking sign of their common ownership was the use of visual experience to evoke the past. But it also became an expression of the increasingly tense association between the diverging genres of Literature and History, as their practitioners sought to define and refine their standing in relation to one another. If the early nineteenth century historians perceived a threat from the historical novel to their status as guardians of the past – and responded by trying to adopt the model of representation that imitated literary evocations of the past via references to visual experience – then the mid to latter half of the century saw a drastic reversal; the historical novel's popularity did not wane but, after Scott, it also became a genre plagued by accusations of inaccuracy and lack of credible authority. History-writing, meanwhile, began to hold itself to what might be thought of as academic standards of accountability and began to distance itself from the kind of narrative, "literary" history exemplified by Macaulay and Carlyle. Thus the desire was no longer to beat literature

in its own game, but to change the rules entirely. As Linda Orr puts it, “History wanted out of literature, just as literature was going to let it in.”⁷⁹ Comparing the mode of evoking the past through Carlyle’s somewhat cavalier use of *Ivanhoe* with the diligent and even awestruck study Charles Dickens makes of Carlyle’s history *The French Revolution* (1837) as a source text for *A Tale of Two Cities*, we can trace significant differences between early and mid-nineteenth century historical texts; the changing relationship between the historical novel and history-writing reflects the gradual disciplinary divorce between Literature and History. While the use of visual experience is an enthusiastically shared feature of early nineteenth-century historical texts – as reflected in *Ivanhoe*’s influence on *Past and Present* – by the time that Dickens publishes *A Tale of Two Cities*, it has become a consciously *literary* tool, evoking a novelist’s – as opposed to a historian’s – literary adaptation of the events of the past. The comparison helps us see that Carlyle’s history-writing seeks to make history itself appear through its visual arresting details like brass rings and glass carriages – whereas the historical novel, in the decades of development spanned between Scott and Carlyle, develops towards a visual mode where details of dress, personal appearance, architecture and landscapes function as ways to set the scene, to provide a convincing background on which to set a foreground of plot and character development.

⁷⁹ Linda Orr, ‘The Revenge of History: A History of History’, *New Literary History*, Vol. 18, No 1 (Autumn 1986), 2.

Chapter 2

The Poetry of “Well-known things”: William Morris and Absent Images

Introduction: Why Morris?

In his lifetime, William Morris did not lack enthusiastic readers. Even in the years just following his death, rising stars like William Butler Yeats and George Bernard Shaw praised the power and beauty of his writings.¹ Today, however, the critical and popular fortunes of his work, particularly of his poems, are not high. There are many reasons for the modern lack of interest in Morris’ poetry, several of them relevant to my current project. For one thing, it is almost inevitable that any study of Morris’ literary work must also respond to his overwhelming productivity in areas that fall outside the boundaries of literature – as well as of “high culture” in general – such as tapestry-making and wall-paper design. Whilst scholars interested in the material aspects of literary culture have written of Morris as a reformer of the book arts, the faux-medieval prettiness of his productions is nevertheless difficult to reconcile with the socialist-revolutionary convictions of his late prose which Marxist critics like E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams have instead chosen to highlight.² In his life, William Morris spread himself thinly across disciplines, arts and media and, as a result, our appreciation of his poetry must take into account that what we are reading is only a very minor aspect of his life’s work. The relatively slight role of his poetry within his life’s oeuvre as it has passed down to us, can in itself make the study of that poetry seem too narrowly

¹ See Peter Faulkner, *William Morris: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1973). Yeats writes, somewhat ambiguously, of Morris that although “one may doubt” that he was the greatest poet of his age, he was, all the same, “the poet of his time who was most perfectly a poet” (415). In *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955, revised edition 1976), E.P. Thompson quotes Yeats as calling Morris, with his “spontaneity and joy”, a “chief of men” (554). In 1936, Shaw writes of Morris that he developed throughout his long career from an “idle singer of an empty day” – borrowing Morris’ own flippant description of himself – to “a prophet and a saint” (Faulkner, 24).

² See E.P. Thompson, *William Morris* and Raymond Williams, *Culture & Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958, revised edition 1983), 130-161.

bound to have anything useful to contribute not only to the study of Morris himself, but also to the study of nineteenth-century poetry and culture. Thus we may find that his poetry is in fact too “minor” to be worth our time. His poetry does seem curiously limited in that it is circumscribed by restrictions imposed by its content and style; his first volume *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858) never strays from its dream-world of Arthurian and medieval picture-making.³ It does not take a careful reader to realise that the poems of this collection are concerned with very specific aesthetic effects that are contingent on the description of surfaces and visual tableaux in alternately Froissartian, and mythically Arthurian, versions of the medieval past. Thus, his poetry appears to be “narrow”, “specific” and perhaps even “minor”.

At the same time, Morris’ poetry is problematic for a modern critic because of the very capaciousness of the artistic goals of Morris’ work, which I suggest are present already in this first volume of poetry. Morris did not write poetry as a side-project, to be read and understood separately and in distinction to his other creative endeavours, such as painting, tapestry-making and architecture. Furthermore, Morris perhaps more than any other of the other members in what can be loosely termed the pre-Raphaelites, insisted that connections between artistic and social goals, between aesthetics and political principles, were not only always present, but also critical to the success of any artistic endeavour.⁴ Alexander Wong echoes a long line of critics that believe Morris’ work can be sharply divided between populist, or broad, political action and narrow, or elitist, aesthetic indulgence: “Morris’ career may be followed in terms of a continual tension, growing with his Socialism, between those

³ One early reviewer of the book complains that, whereas “a poet’s world is with the living world of men, all that [Morris] produces are pictures” (Faulkner, 45).

⁴ Drawing, at least initially, heavily on Ruskin, Morris explicitly describes a crucial relationship between art and political action in his prose works. See, for example, the essays ‘Art and Socialism’ (1884) and ‘The Lesser Arts’ (1877). As a nineteenth-century socialist, his continuing emphasis on the arts as a tool – and even a goal – of political, revolutionary change was unusual, perhaps even unique. See Norman Kelvin, Introduction to *William Morris on Art and Socialism* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999), xiii-xvi, for a clear discussion of the differences between Morris and the burgeoning British socialist movement in this regard.

aspects of his Art which could be felt as indulgent, and those which promoted the Cause.”⁵ However, this chapter seeks to highlight that tension between a seemingly narrowly defined aesthetics, on the one hand, and capaciously ambitious social goals on the other, in order to suggest that the aesthetic, “narrow” qualities of his poetry serve to enlist, and make active, the reader’s participation in exploring the sense of the past, and furthermore encourage thought on how that past can be mined for ways to create a, to Morris’ mind, more sustainably solidaric future.

While my dissertation as a whole argues that visual experience in Victorian historical texts enlists the reader to imagine the distance between past and present, my second chapter focuses on William Morris, and ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, in order to suggest that there are particular possibilities inherent in that kind of active participation of which his poetry makes use: that of a collective and collaborative engagement with the past. In the titular poem, an angel asks a knight to choose between a red and blue cloth. But the conspicuous absence of visual information makes the choice difficult, perhaps even impossible. Morris uses colour words like “red” and “blue” which are examples of visual description in language which relies absolutely on extra-textual referents to make sense, and as a result, I argue, the reader is continually asked to imagine a visual world which the text alone cannot provide. These poems give a sense of incompleteness for a reason; the text conveys that the world of the poem is not self-sufficient, and it *needs* the reader in order to make sense. All literature, of course, require, to some degree, the reader to imagine what is described in order to have meaning, but these poems make the reader’s task highly explicit, by constantly demanding of its readers that they cast their mind toward what the text can never be: an image.

⁵ Alexander Wong, ‘Aesthetic Effects and Their Implications in “Rapunzel”, “The Wind”, and Other Poems From William Morris’ *The Defence of Guenevere*’, *Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Winter 2010), 54.

Morris, as one of the most prominent craftsmen who ever worked to fuse textual and visual media, is a crucial interlocutor for any claim hinging on the difference between how texts and images communicate with their audience. Though his later work, such as the *Kelmscott Chaucer* can be said to more directly address such questions, I believe that his early poetry is a rich – and under-used – source for understanding more about the role of visual experience in Victorian poetry, particularly in how it uses the *absence* of the visual in order to create an actively interpretative poetic experience, asking the reader to participate in the poet’s reconstruction of a certain historical mindset. In this case, the mindset is a medieval one, which to Morris and his circle of pre-Raphaelite artists meant a highly collective and non-individuated view of the world.⁶

The Defence of Guenevere is full of references to visual experience, from the viewpoint of a medieval narrator. It is also packed with references to paintings and other art works created on medieval themes by Morris and others in his circle: for example, ‘King Arthur’s Tomb’, ‘The Blue Closet’ and ‘The Tune of Seven Towers’ all take their titles from three respective paintings by D.G. Rossetti. These references can in themselves give a reader a sense of incompleteness, as if it cannot be satisfactorily understood without access to these companion pieces, or extra-textual visual objects. But I argue that to only ever read Morris’ poetry “together” with visual art pieces misses an important function of the text’s powerful visuality. By constantly referring to the images and to the visual experiences which, necessarily, lie outside the possibilities of the text, his poetry develops an aesthetic which relies on on the crucial absence of images, for its power to connect with, and engage, the reader. Rather than treating the volume as merely a highly “visual” kind of text, we should take note that it is instead the absence of the visual which creates the tension of style and

⁶ For a summary of recent critical work on the relationship between William Morris and the pre-Raphaelites as a movement, see Peter Faulkner, ‘Morris and Pre-Raphaelitism’, *Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer 2012), 40-62.

central scenes of ethical dilemmas, such as the pivotal scene of the choosing cloths. By focusing on the absence, rather than presence of, or access to, visual art in the text, my argument does not by any means imply that we should ignore, or set aside, the visual objects which surround the life and work of Morris and the other pre-Raphaelites – or to cease making comparative studies between the “sister arts”. In fact, I suggest the opposite: if a reader is to gain access to the historical imagination at work in *The Defence*, it is crucial that we understand more fully what sort of effects the book’s insistent references to visual experience can produce, and how visual art – on or off the page – connects to those effects.

The Defence refers to well-known mythological, and historical, versions of the medieval past. Though the history evoked is familiar, the poems seem thematically to return again and again to the difficulty of accessing the past in any comprehensible or satisfying way. Guenevere warns us, on the first page of the volume, that “it seems but little skill / To talk of well-known things past now and dead.”⁷ And, indeed, the poem goes on to show – much like ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’ and ‘The Wind’ – that a sense of incompleteness and partial comprehension is an important aesthetic feature of engaging with the past in Morris’ poetry. The text seeks to connect us to the lived moment of the past through insistent reminders that, paradoxically, the only reason that we can gain historical understanding through descriptions of the past is because the real moment is unattainably gone. Only if we accept the past as beyond reach, can we gain access to its most significant qualities.

In the years leading up to the publication of *The Defence*, Morris already showed a characteristically single-minded interest in visual art as a means of retrieving the past. In the third issue of Morris’s year-long editorship of *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856), he contributed a review of Robert Browning’s book of poems *Men and Women* (1855).

⁷ William Morris, ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, ed. Margaret A. Lourie (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981), l.11-12. Subsequent line references will be given in brackets in the text.

Morris seems particularly impressed by the intensity with which Browning depicts love in all its forms. The strongest kinds of love and longing, Morris believes, “as I think is felt for nothing else under the sun,—at least for no other power” is the love of art, even in those unlucky many “who cannot paint”.⁸ Of ‘Andrea del Sarto’ and ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ he writes:

What a joy it is to have these men brought up before us, made alive again, though they have passed away from the earth so long ago; made alive, seeming indeed not as they might very likely have seemed to us, the lesser men, had we lived in their times; but rescued from the judgment of the world, “which charts us all in its broad blacks or whites”—and shown to us as they really were.⁹

What is also made clear in this passage is the active role that visual art plays to Morris, in making us better see the relationship between the past and the present. The reader – who is quite likely one of the many “who cannot paint” – can still access a masterly expression of “this intense love of art”: Browning’s descriptions of Andrea del Sarto and Fra Lippo Lippi’s paintings.¹⁰ Through Browning’s evocations of the dead, the works and even the painters themselves are “made alive again” – but not, importantly, as they would have seemed “had we lived in their times,” when the lack of temporal distance would make impossible any nuanced representation but the crudest sketch in black and white. Morris insists that viewing the painters out of their historical context will offer a more truthful account of their life and work, even that they will be “shown to us as they really were”. There is an important question posed of Browning’s particular kind of historicism here, almost slyly tucked away in the middle of the sentence. To read Browning’s painter poems, Morris believes, is to view the artists as they would appear “rescued from the judgment of the world”. What would such a rescue entail exactly, and, more to the point, why would we want to undertake it? Consider the forceful contextualism that underpins Browning’s style and ethics of historical

⁸ Morris, ‘Review of *Men and Women* by Robert Browning’, *The William Morris Library: The Hollow Land and Other Contributions to the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, ed. Peter Faulkner (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996) 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

representation. Browning's speakers are so enmeshed in their own historical contexts that, as Mary Gibson suggests, their "very possibilities for thought are shaped in ways that they can only partially understand."¹¹ Even the various ways in which Fra Lippo and Andrea manage to transcend their contexts, of which their contemporaries' judgements are a crucial part, are determined by the ways in which they were entrapped therein to begin with. It therefore seems not only impossible, but also inadvisable, to try to extract them out of these circumstances.

What Morris does in this review, however, is to draw attention to the value of reading at a historical distance. The painters and their works come to us necessarily mediated not just through text, but through the passing of time. We can turn that statement around, and also see that Browning's textual rendition of visual art helps the reader towards a clearer understanding of what sort of historical relationship we should place *ourselves* in towards the poems. Morris imagines Andrea del Sarto sitting next to his difficult wife, trying "to live for one half-hour in the present; yet so, that the past and the future may mingle with it very quietly".¹² But the poem eloquently attests that Andrea's attempt to live in the present is a failure. Gibson argues that "[Andrea] creates a perspective for us but cannot look for long at himself in this context."¹³ Browning and his readers, Morris suggests, must do it for him: "And it shall all go into a picture for the wearied man resting there", he claims by way of quoting the following passage:¹⁴

the whole seems to fall into a shape
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight-piece.¹⁵

¹¹ Mary Ellis Gibson, *History and the Prism of Art: Browning's Poetic Experiments* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 24.

¹² Morris, 'Review', 265-266.

¹³ Gibson, 193.

¹⁴ Morris, 'Review', 266.

¹⁵ Robert Browning, 'Andrea del Sarto' (1855) in *Robert Browning*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), ll. 47-50. Subsequent line references will be given in brackets in the text.

Here is an opportunity for Browning's readers to try to capture Andrea's momentary insight, by way of the "picture" Morris conjures. While Andrea may be trapped in the relentless, diachronic progress of his own life, we may be yet able to view him temporally "whole" – as a "shape" – because we not only have the advantage of distance from Andrea's flawed life, but we are also at a remove from his entire era, so that he can be judged as a separate "work and self", away from the bitter competition of the Renaissance period of greatness in art.

Rather than trying to erase historical distance, I suggest that Morris here offers us a methodology, and a way of utilising, that distance as a mode of relation. He views Browning's poem as a text that can connect us to the lived moment of the past through historical distance; reminding the reader that we can gain historical understanding through descriptions of the past is only because the real moment depicted is gone. By accepting the past as beyond reach, the reader participates in creating the distance that the text evokes – but subsequently the reader can also utilise that distance, to experience the "pastness" of the text, and thus forge a connection between herself and the textual past. Rather than investigating the past, or even seeking to communicate with it, Morris' poetry sets up the past as a mode of relation to the reader, in order to ask if we can experience a sense of the past, of pastness itself. The instrument Morris uses to establish that mode of relation via the past to the reader, is visual experience.

Through a detailed close-reading of the titular poem, this chapter argues that historical distance functions in Morris' poetry as a mode of relation, as a kind of tightrope between reader and the text, and that this tightrope is maintained and kept taut by evoking the past as a series of visual experiences that rely on the status of actual images as absent from the text for their imaginative force. Furthermore, I argue that Morris' poetry enlists the reader to help

evoke the past through considering visual experiences of a particular kind; as continuous surfaces that ignore post-Renaissance conventions of perspective, and instead imagines medieval, “flat” planes where details are sometimes framed in relief, but do not fix the viewer’s perspective, and thus cannot divide into foreground and background. Like the stained-glass windows and cloth patterns Morris admired and imitated, the visual as it is evoked at many points in ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ suggests the possibility of a space where no lines of perspective can be drawn between the art work and the viewer. The idea of the continuous surface – and its consequent rejection of three-dimensional representation – is crucial to a reading of Morris’ poetry, as its aesthetic suggests that a viewer must collaborate with the artist in order to create meaning and order within the image; which brings us back to the collective or collaborative mindset which Morris’ poetry particularly seeks to evoke.

Though my focus in this chapter is on ‘The Defence’, I want to also note that Morris’ preoccupation with visual experience as a way of relating to history is of course by no means restricted to his poetry. Hartley S. Spatt suggests, for example, that the medieval art objects which feature so significantly in Morris’ early fiction are not necessarily there to remind the reader of the past, or to communicate a sense of age and history. Instead, “[‘The Story of the Unknown Church’] reveals to us that the significance of the image resides not in its providing a clear vision of the past, but in the clear vision of each man’s relation to the past which is provided merely by the act of creation.”¹⁶ Here Spatt points out Morris’ constant refrain throughout his works: that the goal is not necessarily to understand what happened in the past, or even to find out more about what the past was like, but that the power of history resides in what sort of relation each reader can strike up *with* the past. This crucial insistence on active participation on behalf of the reader or viewer of any art work or text yields, I

¹⁶ Hartley S. Spatt, ‘William Morris and the Uses of the Past’, *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 13, No. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1975), 4.

suggest, particularly productive results in Morris' early poetry because of its close relationship to particular visual art objects that were created alongside the text. The entire volume seems to call out to be read together with, and alongside, specific art works, such as the murals at the Oxford Union Library (an unfinished, highly collaborative work undertaken mostly by Morris, Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones between 1857-1859), Rossetti's paintings from which Morris drew titles for some of his poems, and his own *Guenevere*.¹⁷ But the references to visual experience in *The Defence* are overwhelmingly evocative exactly because of the conspicuous absence of these very precisely imagined visual objects from the text. Though written words are consumed through the act of looking, they cannot, no matter how "pictorial", actually translate into images. Consequently, *The Defence* is not bringing images in to the text. Rather, I propose, it is bringing attention to what it is not: an image. By doing so, it is asking the reader to accept a fundamental premise of the text's attempt to relate to the past – its absence or loss.

In *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), John Ruskin – who was certainly Morris' most powerful early influence – formulates a theoretical counterpart to Morris' poetry; conjuring up the past through the absence of the visual. Ruskin walks amongst medieval and Renaissance architectural monuments, noting and documenting what he sees. He is not only trying to describe the buildings and art works as he sees them in the present, but he is also attempting to evoke to the reader a sense of the era in which they were created. In looking at the historic buildings of Venice, Ruskin encounters the paradox at the heart of this endeavour: while the visual sense is what provides him with details of the past, and what it

¹⁷ This painting, described by the Tate Gallery as "a portrait in medieval dress" of his wife-to-be wife Jane, was completed in the same year as *The Defence* was published. Its correct title remains in dispute; nowadays, it is mostly known as *La Belle Iseult*. What remains certain is that Morris drew inspiration from Malory's *Morte L'Arthur* to paint it. It was to be the only oil painting Morris ever completed. Her face is familiar to modern audiences, but not from Morris' single painting but from a great catalogue of D.G. Rossetti's sketches, paintings, drawings and murals of Jane Morris, produced both before, during and after the time in which they were lovers.

may have looked like, he is also aware that the eye must be deprived in order for the imagination to work, so that it can produce a *sense* of the past:

The eye is continually influenced by what it cannot detect; nay, it is not going too far to say, that it is most influenced by what it detects least. [...] [T]here is nothing truly noble either in colour or in form, but its power depends on circumstances infinitely too intricate to be explained, and almost too subtle to be traced.¹⁸

Here is one of Ruskin's favourite themes, echoed constantly by his disciple Morris; how art should not seek to inform, but should suggest, in order to affect us. The very fact that "colour" and "form" cannot be explicated or translated into words, because they are too "intricate" and "subtle", is what makes the visual the ultimate textual lack or absence; consequently when we are reminded, in text, of the missing image, we can connect in much more "intricate" and "subtle" ways with what is not there. Isobel Armstrong writes of Morris' "dialogue with Ruskin" in 'The Defence of Guenevere': "The poem becomes intrinsically a form dislocated by the aberrant vision, which simultaneously calls forth as an absence the possibilities from which it deviates."¹⁹ Armstrong rightly identifies Morris' debt to Ruskin in his focus on the literary, textual possibilities of referencing what the eye cannot see; however, the poem does not simply "dislocate" or cut itself off from the world, or the reader, through its "aberrant vision" or, in my interpretation, tension between the written word and the invisible image. Morris, I argue, takes the idea of absent images further in his poetry by considering an image as itself a temporal object. By asking the reader to imagine it into being, we may also imagine ourselves looking at, and forging some sort of relationship with, the time which the image presents to us: an image of the past.

As W.J.T. Mitchell has shown, any text, when read, is experienced visually – our eyes must move, albeit in circumscribed ways, over the page, in order for our perception to make

¹⁸ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice: Vol. II – The Sea Stories* (1853), (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 127.

¹⁹ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poets and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 235.

sense of what we see. We distinguish between this kind of seeing – which we think of not as seeing, but the separate activity of reading – and the kind of seeing which consumes “visual” objects such as paintings, or even just the kind of everyday seeing by which we make sense of the world around us.²⁰ This distinction, however, as Mitchell points out, must always happen on a metaphoric rather than physical level. Mitchell writes of the “spatial” as the basis on which we found our perception of time when reading:

The reading experience may produce in us the sense that no real time is passing, that we are in an eternally timeless realm where everything occurs simultaneously. Or it may produce the illusion of temporal sequence, with distinct stages like beginning, middle, and end. What we need to keep in view is the fact that both of these experiences rise out of our decoding of a spatial form (the text), and both involve a sense that time has a pattern or structure, however various those structures might be.²¹

Mitchell makes clear that all literary texts are, in some sense, some kind of “spatio-temporal construction”.²² ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ foregrounds these inherently literary spatio-temporal properties, the process of “decoding of a spatial form”. In other words, the poems make pointed use of the ever-present tension, in literary text, between word and image, and between the absence and presence of what is represented. In the case of ‘The Defence’, that tension can – as Spatt describes it – encourage the “act of creation” which can in each reader produce a “clear vision” and thus a “relation to the past”. If we are to access the past that these poems convey, we must re-imagine it together, as a visual experience; like a tableau, or a tapestry, in the making.

If a text explicitly requires a reader’s imaginative participation in order to in any way resonate or convey meaning, it stands to reason that on its own the text may appear

²⁰ See W.J.T. Mitchell, ‘Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory’, *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1980), 539-567. See also W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), particularly pp.97-102.

²¹ Mitchell, ‘Spatial Form in Literature’, 544. Mitchell refers to “spatial” rather than “visual” features of the text. Though I think “spatial” is a usefully expansive term, I will continue to use “visual”, as I think that word lets us, more easily, consider the aesthetic effects of spatial form, by which I mean the effects of an experience created by visual sensory perception.

²² Mitchell, *Iconology*, 103.

incomplete and even lifeless. To some critics, Morris' characters of the past do indeed appear as troublingly remote, and deadened.²³ Jerome McGann argues that they must appear that way, in order for the poem to show that it is only the "textual condition" itself, that is the physical pages of the book consumed by the reader, which can make these people in any sense alive again: "Morris intends his poems as a vehicle for bringing about [a] secular resurrection of the dead. For such persons the way back to experience is imagined to lie, paradoxically, through the textual condition."²⁴ McGann here points to Morris' attention to the materiality of the textual medium, which seeks to incorporate the physical properties of the book into the reader's aesthetic experience. The only "way back to experience" is through the interaction between the reader and the page. Though McGann argues that Morris actually creates this relationship between the text and the reader-as-viewer, I would instead, following Mitchell, suggest that Morris' text actually makes the visual experience of reading – which a reader always has even if we do not think of it as visual – matter more than most texts do. More specifically, 'The Defence of Guenevere' asks the reader to always consider the text – and to view it, as well as read it – in relation to the images it refers to, but can never actually become.

A Redundant Defence

Two years after his review of *Men and Women*, William Morris published a book of poetry of his own, *The Defense of Guenevere and Other Poems*. The many similarities with, and influences of, Robert Browning are noticeable not only in the frequent use of the dramatic monologue, and perhaps also the *terza rima* verse form for the titular poem, which Browning

²³ For two strong examples of this critique, see David Shaw, 'Arthurian Ghosts: The Phantom Art of *The Defence of Guenevere*', *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Autumn 1996), 299-312, and Richard Frith, "'Honourable and Noble Adventures': Courtly and Chivalric Idealism in Morris's Froissartian Poems', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Winter 2007), 13-29.

²⁴ Jerome McGann, "'A Thing to Mind': The Materialist Aesthetic of William Morris' in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 54.

had employed in ‘The Statue and the Bust’.²⁵ Morris also had a model in Browning with regard to the extensive archival knowledge which informs and shapes the poems that are set in a recognisable historical period. For Morris, as for Browning, the otherness of the past is often presented through historical detail; the Florence of Browning’s ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ is one where the law is maintained by “the Eight” (l.121) and the difference between Carmelites, Camaldolese and Dominicans (ll. 139-140) is too obvious to require further elaboration. Similarly, in Morris, the speaker of ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’ clearly expects his audience to understand his reference to his childhood fear of “the Jacquerie” (l.99), a revolt that took place in northern France during the Hundred Years War. The “tax [...] on salt” (l.421) also locates ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’ in France during the rule of Charles V, though surely only to those initiated in the intricacies of the period.

To Victorian and modern critics alike, Morris’ attention to historical detail has sometimes appeared as antiquarian, and consequently alienating from a point of view of a contemporary reader’s concerns. One early reviewer of *The Defence* complains that the book wastes the author’s “considerable powers”, because of his devotion to a “false principle of art”, leading him away from “the poet’s work [which] is with the living world of men”, whereas “all that [Morris] produces are pictures.”²⁶ A century or so later, Graham Hough echoes this position:

Thus for Morris to collect the old stories, to accept them as they come, and to tell them again in a style that removes them as far as possible from the troubled actuality of life, is to perform the proper function of the poet. It is a curiously incomplete aesthetic [...] It explains some of Morris’ odd but persistent views about poetry – that anybody who is any good ought to be able to compose it while weaving a tapestry at the same time.²⁷

²⁵ Naomi Levine argues that in ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, Morris “refigures *terza rima* as a form about another form: the erotic triangle” (506). See Naomi Levine, ‘Trebled Beauty: William Morris’s Terza Rima’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Spring 2011), 506-517.

²⁶ Faulkner, *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, 45.

²⁷ Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1947), 125-126.

Hough rehearses the notion which has so troubled Morris' afterlife as a poet: his style is both too limited, because it is too archaic to have any bearing on the reader's own life – and too capacious, because it tries to incorporate other media and arts into its circle of relevance and contexts. Even though his tone is clearly not sympathetic, Hough is right, I believe, to identify these two features – the archaism, which sets up the distance between the reader and the past evoked in the texts on the one hand, and the close relationship of the poems to other areas of Morris' artistic production on the other – as interlinked and perhaps even interdependent. In many ways, this interdependence helps us to distinguish what sort of questions Morris's poetry is asking about history. Rather than asking “what happened in the past” Morris, I suggest, helps the readers think through their relationship to the past *per se*. I will endeavour to explain what I mean by this, by discussing three particular features of Morris' poetry that I outlined briefly in the chapter's first section: firstly, the necessity of establishing a sense of historical distance, which serves as a mode for the reader of relating, and connecting with, the past of the text; secondly, the references to visual experience as a way for the reader to participate in evoking the past while drawing attention to the absence of actual images; finally, the ethical value of a perspective-less, continuous surface as a way of encouraging a particular kind of collaborative engagement between the reader and the text.

‘The Defence of Guenevere’ sets up a series of visual tableaux, the first of which, in a startling *in medias res* opening, leads us in only four short stanzas through to Guenevere launching her defence:²⁸

²⁸ In an Appendix to her critical edition of the poems, Margaret A. Lourie notes that there was, originally, another eight and a half stanzas that preceded the opening as printed. She mentions W. Dixon Scott and Paul Thompson's suggestion that the omission of the original beginning stanzas was simply a result of a printer's mistake. Lourie prefers to believe May Morris' assertion that the original beginning was discarded by her father before the manuscript went to print. Though I do not stake my own claim about the power of the poem on that assertion, I agree with Lourie and May Morris that it appears unlikely that a poem which consists entirely of terza rima stanzas would originally have included a ninth two-line stanza in its finished print form. Furthermore, though perhaps less persuasively, the tone and quality of the omitted stanzas seem to me noticeably different (and worse) from that of the remainder of the printed poem.

But, knowing now that they would have her speak,
She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,

As though she had had there a shameful blow,
And feeling it shameful to feel ought but shame
All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so,

She must a little touch it; like one lame
She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head
Still lifted up; and on her cheek of flame

The tears dried quick; she stopped at last and said:
“O knights and lords, it seems but little skill
To talk of well-known things past now and dead.”
(ll.1-12)

We are thrown, to great dramatic effect, and with forceful immediacy, into a scene in the Arthurian cycle which Malory omits. Guenevere and Launcelot have been caught as lovers, resulting in Launcelot fleeing to gather his men to rescue Guenevere, who is put on trial for treason against her husband King Arthur. The poem takes place during that trial; Guenevere is surrounded by the Knights of the Round Table, and addresses them to state her defence against their accusations.

At first, it seems like the purpose of the scene is to show just what sort of juicy drama Malory has missed out on by passing over Guenevere's trial without letting her speak. But the dramatic impact of the scene is obscured, almost instantly, by the confusing movement of the observer, or narrator, of the poem. Like an omniscient observer of a novel, the narrator wanders in and out of Guenevere's mind, sometimes observing her face and bodily gestures, sometimes narrating her thoughts. The potential for a linear – and exciting – movement of the plot is halted already before it has begun. It is immediately apparent that rather than a retelling of the myth, here is a poem which, as Chris Brooks and Inga Bryden notes of the Victorian Arthurian revival as a whole, instead “insist[s] on a particular ‘moment’ from a legend, coupled with experimental narrative techniques”, allowing for “psychological

analysis of character”.²⁹ There is a foreclosure of forward drive in terms of pacing and plot, in favour of a sense that we are experiencing many viewpoints, both visually and temporally, at once. But “at last” the wandering back and forth stops for the moment, and Guenevere addresses the crowd: “O knights and lords, it seems but little skill / To talk of well-known things past now and dead.” These two lines call attention to how deeply familiar the past of the Arthur story is, to Guenevere’s audience – as well as to Morris’ readers. One could read the lines as a call for revisionist accounts of history as well as of the Arthur myth. Feminist critics analysing Guenevere’s speech have, in some cases, answered that call.³⁰ But a revisionist account of a certain piece of history or myth must surely depend on the assumption that there is a “true” version of that event or story available, if we could only dig deeper – either via Morris’ text or through various Victorian or medieval contextual sources. This is an idea of the past which the poem does not support. The opening word of the poem is “But”, which immediately calls attention to its conditional – or at the very least ambiguous – attitude toward the subsequent action narrated in the text.³¹

By operating through “ifs”, through failed analogies and mystifying hypothetical suppositions, the text suspends any possibility of judgement on Guenevere’s actions – because we are left in the dark as to what actions did take place, if any at all. In her recent discussion of the poem, Elizabeth Helsinger refers to what she considers one of the most striking elements of Morris’ poetry: “an unnatural suspension, a suppression of knowledge

²⁹ Chris Brooks and Inga Bryden, ‘The Arthurian Legacy’ in *The Arthur of the English: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, ed. W.R.J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 261.

³⁰ See for example Laura Struve, ‘The Public Life and Private Desires of Women in William Morris’s ‘Defence of Guenevere’, *Arthuriana*, Vol.6, No. 3 (Fall 1996), 15-28, and Virginia S. Hale and Catherine Barnes Stevenson, ‘Morris’ Medieval Queen: A Paradox Resolved’, *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 1992), 171-178.

³¹ See Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982), 20. Silver argues that the opening word calls attention to the moral ambiguity which Guenevere uses throughout the poem to throw doubt on her guilt.

and feeling.”³² Helsinger here points out the taut, tightly wound suspension of action which occurs – or, rather, produces a failure of anything to occur, throughout the poem. And Guenevere warns us in her first lines of speech: “O knights and lords, it seems but little skill / To talk of well-known things past now and dead.” The whole sentence speaks in redundancies: she is saying that “it may seem like it is not difficult to talk about the past that has now become the past”. We may think we know exactly how we should approach the past, because we think we know everything that happened in the past. But perhaps, this speech implies, asking “what happened in the past” is not productive, and merely beginning a dead-end line of inquiry. In fact, the entirety of Guenevere’s defence – the seeming *raison d’être* of the poem – has puzzled many reviewers because of its unashamed redundancy. Why do we need to hear a speech from Guenevere at this juncture of the Arthur story? Why should Guenevere warn us to be suspicious of any confident accounts of the past? One could argue that Morris imagines the reason Guenevere speaks is merely to stall, until Launcelot arrives at the end to save her from burning at the stake. What she does say, if this is the case, in her defence, cannot be considered an important contribution to a revision of the myth. Furthermore, it seems strangely superfluous to invent a scene of Guenevere’s defence from a charge of which all readers must know she is guilty, because the plot she is participating in requires it to be so. In short, in twelve lines the poem effectively does away with the question “what happened in the past” as not only irrelevant to its purpose, but impossible to ask.

Constance W. Hassett writes of the volume that “[t]he statements that [its] poems appear to make are provisional, not permanent.”³³ She goes on to argue that because the poems seek to “prevent settled meanings” they also work against “a poetry of ethical

³² Elizabeth Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 68.

³³ Constance W. Hassett, ‘The Style of Evasion: William Morris’ *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*’, *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Summer 1991), 107.

statement”.³⁴ I agree that the “statements”, if we take that term to mean declarations about what has happened, are provisional at best in this text, and that includes those of an ethical kind. But Hassett is too hasty to lump together ethics and certainty of meaning here. Guenevere warns us of it – “it seems but little skill / To talk of well-known things”. What may seem like a task that calls for an ethical “statement” of some kind – a confession, or the discovery or revelation of a past action presented for present judgement – may in fact require ethical attention of a different kind; these are “well-known things” that are “past *now* and dead” (my italics). In order to understand what happened in the past, we must first accept the past as inaccessible, or at least at a great remove from the present. We need to understand and really appreciate that there is a historical distance if we are to connect to the past. Historical distance thus functions as a kind of tightrope between the reader and the text, where both ends need to be taut; in order to establish a link, or a mode of relation, we need to be constantly remind ourselves of the distance or gap between ourselves and what is described. The tension which holds that tightrope taut is one of uncertainty.

We have thus been thoroughly warned off asking “what happened in the past”, as Guenevere continues on to defend her account of her history. Instead, as I have suggested above, the poem asks if it is possible to evoke a sense of the past. Guenevere’s tactic of defence is to ask her audience to draw a strange analogy to her past: to imagine themselves visited on their death bed by a “great God’s angel”, who asks the dying “you” to choose between two coloured cloths:

‘One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
Now choose one cloth for ever; which they be,
I will not tell you, you must somehow tell’
(ll. 22-24)

³⁴ Ibid., 107.

Karen Herbert suggests that Guenevere's recourse to allegory is an attempt to formulate "the unknown in the context of the known", and thus try to re-write – and thereby ultimately distance herself from – the hypocritical moral practices of her society.³⁵ I agree with Herbert that the monologue's inventive use of allegory points to the poem's desire to draw attention to "reified associations between word, image and concept". She concludes that Guenevere's innovative verbal figures for visual experience – of which the "choosing cloths" is the most notable – "removes her from the confines of [...] officially sanctioned semantics to the realm of freedom."³⁶ Guenevere continues to describe the choice of the cloths, which she urges her listeners to compare to the impossible situation she has faced in choosing between her husband and Launcelot:

And one of these strange choosing cloths was blue,
Wavy and long, and one cut short and red;
No man could tell the better of the two.

After a shiver half-hour you said:
'God help! Heaven's colour, the blue,' and he said, 'hell'
Perhaps you then would roll upon your bed.

(ll. 34-39)

Herbert reads the angel's refusal to guide his "reader's" choice as symptomatic of Guenevere's defence. The Queen's society may consider the association between blue-ness and heaven to equate moral right, and that between red-ness and hell to equate moral wrong. But in Herbert's reading, Guenevere inverts these previously iron-clad categories, in order to show her accusers that "[b]ecause society's allocation of right and wrong is incompatible with private (and natural) desire, true and false become relative and historical."³⁷ Guenevere re-shapes her past choices into an allegory to be comprehensible to herself, rather than defensible to her audience. Herbert is here arguing against the numerous interpreters who

³⁵ Karen Herbert, 'Dissident Language in "The Defence of Guenevere"', *Victorian Poetry*, Vol.34, No. 3 (Autumn 1996), 316.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 316.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 318.

consider the allegory of the choosing cloths to be both Guenevere's most vigorously expressed profession of innocence against charges of infidelity, and simultaneously the most damning evidence of her guilt.³⁸ Though Herbert's re-construction of the choosing cloths as a question of relative moral values, rather than of proof, is a welcome change of interpretative direction, it nevertheless still places Guenevere in a symbolic, or analogical, relationship to the red and blue cloths. In Herbert's reading, the cloths help Guenevere to illustrate her possible liberation from suffocating linguistic and moral codes. But Ellen W. Sternberg has pointed out that Guenevere's analogy to her own life, however compelling in its presentation, can also be taken as a dramatic feint:

The choice of cloth is a blind one, an elaborate game. The consequences of that decision might be hellish, but they cannot be known or foreseen. The choice of mate or lover, on the other hand is conscious and considered, and, in Guenevere's case, hardly depends on luck. And both the responsibilities of her marriage to Arthur and the consequences of her liaison with Lancelot – an act tantamount to inviting disaster – would have been clearly known to the Queen.³⁹

Expressed this way, it certainly seems disingenuous to compare the choice of adultery over fidelity to the angel's blunt "No man could tell the better of the two". Guenevere's "allegorical self" responds: "Ah Christ! if only I had known, known, known" (l.41). The rhythmic pattern of the poem helps to emphasise the Queen's anguish by the sudden triad of "known". But we must ask with Sternberg: what sort of foreknowledge does Guenevere claim to have lacked exactly? A decision as arbitrary as that between red and blue, leading to a choice of heaven or hell – which could certainly provoke a dying soul's anguished call for

³⁸ See for example James Carley, "Heaven's Colour, the Blue": Guenevere and the Choosing Cloths Re-read', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Autumn 1990), 20-22, and Constance W. Hassett, 'The Style of Evasion: William Morris' "The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems"', *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Summer 1991), 99-114, particularly 104-105. There appeared a (surprisingly large) number of articles in *Victorian Poetry* throughout the 1970s which debated Guenevere's innocence through the choosing cloths parable, the most frequently cited being Dennis R. Balch, 'Guenevere's Fidelity to Arthur in "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb"', Vol. 13, No.3/4 (Fall/Winter 1975), 61-70, and Jonathan F.S. Post, 'Guenevere's Critical Performance', Vol. 17, No. 4 (Winter 1979), 317-327. Though these articles vary in their stance on Guenevere's guilt, they all consider the question of her guilt to be central to the poem's concerns, and also view the choosing cloths as the central expression of that concern.

³⁹ Ellen W. Sternberg, 'Verbal and Visual Seduction in "The Defence of Guenevere"', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, Vol. VI, No. 2 (May 1986), 46.

pre-knowledge – has no bearing on the Queen’s situation, and is thus, at best, a weak defence, and at worst, a renunciation of moral responsibility.

So are we to take it that the choosing of the cloths is not only void of evidentiary value, but also empty of any moral weight, in terms of how Guenevere defends her actions? Again, I think the question of “what happened” is misleading, and we would do better to ask “can we experience what she is describing”. In the angel, Guenevere evokes a familiar type of medieval image, perhaps from a church altar, or a stained glass relief. The image is structured according to the rules of Christian allegorical art, which uses images as shorthand to communicate biblical dictates and wisdom contained in parables and stories. But there is no explanation, or corresponding wisdom, underlying the revelation of this parable: that the blue cloth means “hell”. Guenevere is asking us, her audience, if it were possible for her – or for anyone – to have understood and known without the advantage of hindsight what the right answer is. But of course, unless you possess some sort of insider information about what the angel will say, you cannot predict the outcome.

The failure here is thus not Guenevere’s erroneous choice, but a failure on a larger scale: it is a failure of aesthetic, rather than causal, explanation. The blue and the red of the choosing cloths are, as words describing colour, particularly conspicuous cases of visual absences in literary language, and thus also an extreme example of calling attention to the status of images as “missing” or “absent” from the text. The colour word on the page requires the use of eyesight to read it, but the meaning of the word absolutely depends on some sort of non-textual visual experience to make sense, to make meaning. It does so by evoking the sense in us that is most fully engaged – the visual – while reading, though at the same time the actual images evoked are, indeed, missing. The text is thus asking us to engage more fully the visual, the sense we are already using the most, in order to make its aesthetic effects – the red and the blue – “mean more”. The text needs the reader to evoke the missing images, in

order for the past to come alive – and here, that argument is taken even further by implying that without the reader’s aesthetic engagement, the past cannot even make sense.

Many critics, most recently Elizabeth Helsinger, have remarked on the extraordinary use of colour words in Morris’ poetry. She notes that it is the relationship between colours, rather than in significances of individual colours, that may be of most use to Morris, particularly in his early poetry; what she calls “color’s conceptual possibilities, where *patterns* of color [...] suggest the possibility of an analogous method of encoding and ordering conceptual content (particularly that of spatial and temporal relationships).”⁴⁰

Helsinger does not dwell on the status of colour words as particularly problematic language constructs, but her emphasis on “patterns” and colour relationships which can form new ways of encoding meaning suggest how difficult it is to extract reliable meaning from any single instance of colour.

Walter Pater helps to define another crucial aspect of the kind of visual experience that colour words provide in Morris’ poetry: “A passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliance and relief – all redness is turned into blood, all water to tears.”⁴¹ The “passion” of the past is helplessly self-contained and thus “sealed” off, but that inaccessibility in itself produces a “tension” in our imaginative scope which makes the world and our senses – described by Pater as indistinguishable from one another, simply as “the sensible world” – come to us with “reinforced brilliance and relief”. The image, when it returns, has more light,

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Helsinger, *Poetry and the pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris*, 57. Her concept of “lyric color” in ‘The Defence’ in particular hinges on the poem’s temporal evocation of the present through the past: “[lyric color] evokes aesthetic completion while suggesting, criticizing and suffering the incompleteness of modern life” (57). I suggest, however, that it is not “modern life” which is incomplete but rather the aesthetic of incompleteness is in and of the poems themselves, whereby they engage the reader to act as a viewer, and to help the text construct images of the past through the text.

⁴¹ Walter Pater, ‘Unsigned review of poems by William Morris’ in *The Westminster Review*, Vol. 90, No. 34 (1868), 300-312, reprinted in *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. James Sambrook (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 108. Pater is here describing the “delirium” of ‘The Blue Closet’, which beauty he sees as “reserved perhaps for the enjoyment of the few” (107). It is an essay made justifiably (in)famous as a manifesto of Pater’s elitist, and strongly eroticised, aestheticism.

as well as sharper outlines. The result is that the “redness” is turned to a physical, possibly frightening, substance, and “water” transforms into a liquid with equally strong emotional connotations. It does not seem a big step from Pater’s account, to the red and blue of the angel and the choosing cloths, seen “Held out two ways, light from the inner skies, / Showing him well,” (ll.30-31) an image which Guenevere’s allegorical self tries to “read”. The angel certainly makes a commanding picture, with his stern visual cue that asks us to choose the right or left hand, blue or red, right or wrong. He is visible in relief, with Pater’s “reinforced brilliance”, against the light from “the inner skies”, “Holding within his hands the cloths on wands” (l.33). Guenevere is asking us, her audience, if it were possible for her – or for anyone – to have understood and known in advance and alone, to ““somehow tell / Of your own strength and mightiness; here, see!’ / Yea, yea, my lord, and you to ope your eyes” (ll. 24-26), at which point the angel is standing there with the cloths held out. Only in the evocation of the experience to her audience – through establishing historical distance can Guenevere hope to make sense of the past.

Pater was not the only nineteenth-century critic to note the import of colour words in Morris; in a retrospective review in 1871, Robert K. Weeks writes that “[i]n some of this early work it is curious to see what a disposition there is to distinguish things by their colours, rather than by their forms even, or by any inherent qualities.”⁴² In what may serve as an explanatory note to Weeks’ observation, Richard Cronin writes in his study of colour words in nineteenth-century poetry:

We have a feeling that red is a fairly stable quality, and that feeling persists despite the fact that we know full well that we would be unable to say where the territory of red ends and that of the neighbouring colours begins. Our confidence has nothing to do with any facts about colour, and everything to do with the secure status of the word red. Colours, as opposed to colour, exist only in the process of being named.⁴³

⁴² Faulkner, *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, 168.

⁴³ Richard Cronin, *Colour and Experience in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 12.

Colour, thus – as opposed to colours – seems entirely a product of immediate sensory perception, rather than of reflection (in language), which is why, Cronin suggests, Locke relegated it to the status of a shadowy “secondary” realm of reality.⁴⁴ But for Guenevere, and for her reader, more is required of colour than a “secure status of the word red”. The colour word on the page requires the use of eyesight to read it, but the meaning of the word absolutely depends on some sort of non-textual visual experience to make sense, to make meaning. The reader is asked to utilise an aesthetic perception of the past. In other words, the text is asking us to experience, rather than to establish, verify or uncover. The ethical value of the allegory resides not in its successful decoding, but in the potential for “blue-ness” and “red-ness” to mean more. It does so by evoking the sense in us that is most fully engaged – the visual – while reading, though at the same time the actual images evoked are, indeed, missing. The colour words are thus asking us to engage more fully the sense we are already using the most, the visual, in order to make its aesthetic effect “mean more”.

If we accept that proposition, and that colour words are particularly conspicuous cases of visual absences in literary language, then what sort of meaning is produced by that absence? Here, I want to briefly return to what I have called the overly capacious, or ambitious, aspect of Morris’ work: his insistence that his prolific artistic production, spanning non-literary media such as glass, cloth and paper textiles, always possesses broad political and social implications. Consider the resistance, in Morris’ work of textiles, patterns and visual art, to three-dimensional representation. In ‘Some Hints on Pattern-Designing’ (1881), Morris describes the “satisfying mystery” he sees as the goal of a successful pattern; the idea is “to prevent people from counting the repeats of our pattern, while we manage to lull their

⁴⁴ Ibid., 12.

curiosity to trace it out”.⁴⁵ Pattern-designing itself is defined as “the ornamentation of a surface by work that is not imitative nor historical”, which has resulted in the name “ornamental art” (though Morris cannot resist adding that “indeed all real art is ornamental”).⁴⁶ It is important to Morris that the ornamental surface of a pattern-design does not operate as a mimetic art work, because the “mystery” lies in the appearance of infinity within the pattern, rather than in any references to an indeterminate reality beyond it. Certain passages of ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ function much like one of those wallpaper designs, in that they suggest the image to be all continuous surface, which will direct the reader’s attention away from the corners and edges of the pattern, away from counting the repeats of the figure, and instead asks us to follow where the pattern leads.⁴⁷ In other words, the text directs the reader’s attention away from how the symbol is duplicated to form a pattern; away from the edges where work’s status as a representation, or imitation, of the world outside the pattern, can be detected. If we instead let our eyes follow where the pattern appears to lead, we soon discover that it is not possible to comprehend any conventional sort of sequential, or diachronic, meaning from such an invariable surface.

The idea of the continuous surface – and its consequent rejection of three-dimensional representation – is crucial to a reading of Morris’ poetry, as it suggests the possibility of a space in which no lines of perspective between the artist, the art work, and the reader/viewer can be drawn. Take again the example of the allegory of the cloths. The angel asks us to choose one cloth, one colour, to in a sense pick out and highlight one cloth, or one colour, over the other. The angel, then, is asking us to turn a flat image into a three-dimensional image that relies on a post-Renaissance idea of perspective to make sense. That three-dimensional image relies, just as the interpretation of an allegory, on a tension between

⁴⁵ William Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-Designing’, *News From Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 271.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁴⁷ See Figures 1-3 for examples of Morris’ wall-paper designs ranging from 1864 to 1882.

surface and depth meaning. The riddle of the cloth has no satisfying answer, because the colour word “blue”, which constitutes the poem’s surface, cannot be peeled back to “reveal” the reason why it means “hell”. When read as an allegory, which relies on a tension between surface and depth, event and meaning, the parable of the choosing cloths is thus unintelligible: the colour blue, inexplicably, turns out to mean “hell”.⁴⁸ Meaning, like so many aspects of Guenevere’s experience, is presented as incomprehensible, because we move from moment to moment without any real sense of why one thing may happen after the next, or indeed if anything has happened at all. When viewing the past, we benefit from the historical distance between ourselves and the past. But as soon as our perspective is fixed, which is what we need in order to read a three-dimensional image – an image that requires a determination of ground and foreground – the consequence in Morris’ poetic universe is one of failed aesthetic perception and comprehension.⁴⁹

Distance vs. Perspective

In order to make the idea of a distinction between the uses of distance and perspective more evident, I will discuss the passage of the poem in which Guenevere comes closest to describing the past as a comprehensible experience. This is the description that actually matters – the “day in Spring” of which “No minute of that wild day ever slips / From out my memory” (ll.104-106). On this day, Guenevere and Launcelot (perhaps) consumed their forbidden love, and presumably the Queen’s audience of Knights are sharpening their ears

⁴⁸ In her article on the use of colour in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, Josephine Koster Tarvers considers the heraldic, as well as liturgical, medieval languages of colour that Morris was well-versed in by the time that he published his first book of poems. Her discussion shows that in both symbolic “alphabets”, the colours red and blue are attached to so many and contradictory meanings that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine a single meaning such as “Heaven” or “Hell” denoting either colour without immediately coming across an example of the opposite connotation. See Josephine Koster Tarvers, “‘The Deep Still Land of Colors’: Color Imagery in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*”, *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Spring 1987), 180-193.

⁴⁹ See figures 4 and 5 for examples of pre-Raphaelite visual art pieces that de-emphasise three-dimensional perspective in favour of a medieval aesthetic of continuous surface.

and eyes as she finally stops prevaricating and arrives at this crucial scene. “Do I not know now of a day in Spring?” she asks, before assuring us not a minute of that day will ever escape her memory. Even if it is rhetorical, it is an odd question. She is asking if she knows now what happened back then, on the fateful Spring day, as if it would only have been possible for her to know after the event what her experience was. Guenevere presents what may or may not have happened as a conditional, as a rhetorical structure rather than as a past event. It seems we are again back in the trap set by the allegory of the choosing cloths, where meaning is the answer to a riddle that is only found in a visual experience which is absent. Like in the analogy of the cloths, Guenevere is still insisting that her life is incomprehensible when experienced moment to moment, and that it is only now, in the retelling, that she can actually understand what did occur. The hypothetical structure of Guenevere’s re-telling alerts us to the crucial role we have to play in that experience as a reader and co-constructor of the past. Here, then, is where the poem asks the reader to consider what the text evokes, and to view it, as a visual object in and of itself. And the following section shows us, I believe, that it is a very particular kind of visual object that we are asked to consider:

A little thing just then had made me mad;
I dared not think, as I was wont to do,
Sometimes, upon my beauty; if I had

Held out my long hand up against the blue,
And, looking on the tenderly darken'd fingers,
Thought that by rights one ought to see quite through,

There, see you, where the soft still light yet lingers,
Round by the edges; what should I have done,
If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,

And startling green drawn upward by the sun?
But shouting, loosed out, see now! all my hair,
And trancedly stood watching the west wind run

With faintest half-heard breathing sound: why there
I lose my head e'en now in doing this;
But shortly listen: In that garden fair

Came Launcelot walking; this is true, the kiss
Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,
I scarce dare talk of the remember'd bliss,

When both our mouths went wandering in one way,
And aching sorely, met among the leaves;
Our hands being left behind strained far away.

Never within a yard of my bright sleeves
Had Launcelot come before: and now so nigh!
After that day why is it Guenevere grieves?

(ll.118-141)

It is important that this is the passage where Guenevere comes closest to describing the past as a comprehensible experience – an observation I will return to in a moment. However, the dreamy strangeness of her earlier attempts at explication remains in the first half of the passage, and here seems to turn into rather unabashed self-absorption. “If”, she speculates, she had “dared to think” on her own beauty, then a whole sequence of emotions, thoughts and events would have ensued. She would have looked up at her own hand against the sky, and expected to be able to see through it up to the infinite blue, as blue as the angel’s cloth, of the sky – but she doesn’t see through her hand, instead, she looks right at it, and watches its darkened edges against the blue of the sky, and next to the “yellow spotted singer” bird, and the greenery of the garden around her, and even against the gold of her own hair. At this point in the description Guenevere even demonstrates to her audience in the present what her hair would look like loose, which she says makes her “lose her head” even now to think of.

Guenevere thus positions herself, her body and her hair, to slot in with the picture. It is a remarkably detailed description of an image which presumably did not happen, at least according to her initial assurance that she “dared not think” upon her beauty at all that day. It is also a picture which – if it takes places at all – then happens both in the present of the Queen’s defence, and in the past of the “Spring day”, as is evident from her call to those

watching – “There, see you” – to closer inspect the image, and her subsequent comment to her audience that she “e’en now” loses her head “doing this”. She seamlessly moves from the past to the present, via the beauty of the image: her hair, had she set it loose to blow against the blue sky and the green and yellow birds of the garden. The picture, like the red and blue choosing cloths, is importantly hypothetical, but unlike the earlier image, the beauty of the garden provides a starting point to describe something that actually did happen: “Came Launcelot walking; this is true, the kiss / Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day”. What is stopping her from continuing to give a more detailed account is no longer confusion and uncertainty, but something closer to modesty: “I scarce dare talk of the remember’d bliss”.

So what has changed – why can Guenevere now, with the help of a hypothetical image of herself and the garden, attempt to answer her questioners? What at first seems to be a moment of, (even by pre-Raphaelite standards), excessive self-absorption in one’s own beauty, is in fact a passage when she urges her audience to consider her, even at her most intimate and introspective, as just one element of an image rather than as a self-sufficient object of beauty. The result is an image which consists of both viewer and viewed.⁵⁰ She even asks her audience/reader/viewer to “see you” and “see now” for ourselves, thereby committing us to also form some sort of part of the composite picture she creates. Past and present, foreground and background, the self and its surroundings (including its observers), have been slotted, like panes of glass, to fit alongside each other in a flat image. There has been a levelling of perspectives, where the past and the present, and the individual and the

⁵⁰ In this regard, ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ makes an interesting distinction to D.G. Rossetti’s ‘The Blessed Damozel’ (1847), a poem which Morris’ volume as a whole is often compared to, and considered to be strongly influenced by. Though the two individual poems are similar in that they are interested in evoking a medieval image, where there is a lack of fixed perspective, ‘The Blessed Damozel’ never takes the potentially radical step of allowing what the Damozel views, and herself as viewed, come together as *one* image. For a discussion of medieval perspective as a stylistic device in ‘The Blessed Damozel’, see David Latham, ‘Haunted Texts: The Invention of Pre-Raphaelite Studies’ in *Haunted Texts: Studies in pre-Raphaelitism in Honour of William E. Fredeman*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 1-34.

community, are proximate, rather than at fixed distances from each other. Norman Kelvin, discussing the curious “flattened” effect of time in Morris’ writings, argues that it constitutes a deliberate avoidance of a dialectic form of history:

Like Ruskin’s, [Morris’] vision is moral-aesthetic. The aesthetic gives rise to the moral and governs it: the centrality of the aesthetic, finally, makes history for Morris a dialogue between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century and causes the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century in his characteristic reference to be juxtaposed. They are cemented together like two forms in a mosaic, or like leaded panes in a medieval – or Morris & Co. – stained-glass window.⁵¹

Rather than letting the past contrast with the present – to make a teaching-lesson of history, for use in the present – Kelvin here identifies Morris’ impulse to create a flat plane image, an example of what Kelvin describes as “patterns in which time functions as simultaneity only”.⁵² Examples of those sorts of patterns would be the sort of medievalist images of endlessly repeatable sequences of heraldic symbols which Morris went on to create, but a case can also be made to include the image Guenevere evokes here, which is a composite evocation of beauty, refusing to privilege one object over another, and consequently letting layers of time and vision be seen simultaneously. Here is a sharp contrast to the image the angel held out of the cloths toward the person on the death bed, where the colour “blue” was revealed to mean “hell”. Recall that the angel has been described as having “hands, / Held out two ways, light from the inner skies / Showing him well”, which implies that his hands holding the wands are seen as foreground, silhouetted against the background of light from the “inner” skies. Not only are we told what is foreground and what is background in the image, but the observer’s point of view – in the bed – is clearly outlined, thereby fixing the perspectival distance between all actors of the image evoked. But in the garden vision, as has

⁵¹ Norman Kelvin, ‘Patterns in Time: The Decorative and the Narrative in the Work of William Morris’ in *Nineteenth-Century Lives: Essays Presented to Jerome Hamilton Buckley*, eds. Laurence S. Lockridge, John Maynard, and Donald D. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 142.

already been established, all is absorbed into one image, with no revelations of meaning “hiding” underneath a surface. Instead, all is surface.

To experience the self and the world – which must also include the spectator of the image – as one composite picture is, as Isobel Armstrong shows, a Ruskinian notion of the art work as a vehicle through which we can perceive our own relation to the past. According to Armstrong, ‘The Defence’ is “an attempt to *be* the form in which modern consciousness shaped by work and labour sees, experiences and desires [...] Its assumption is that a modern consciousness needs to imagine the past in this way, not that the past will be a tool for analysis.”⁵³ Like Kelvin, Armstrong reads ‘The Defence’ as a model of not only how to view the past, but how to actually construct the reader’s own relationship to the past. Asking the reader to imagine a composite image, allows for Guenevere’s past and present to exist simultaneously without being blurred, or confused for one another – instead they exist *alongside* each other. At this stage of the poem, after declaring “this is true” of her kiss with Launcelot, Guenevere is more than capable of coherently distinguishing events from non-events, and the past from the present: “Never” had Launcelot been so close to her “before”, and “now, so nigh!”. Morris by no means wishes the historical distance between past and present to be erased, rather his text attempts to evoke an image of the past as it looks without a fixed line of perspective between the viewer and the viewed.

Frederick Kirchhoff argues that Morris’ discomfort with three-dimensional representation, and his preference for the medieval art work which presents a level, composite image, is due to an abhorrence of investing any single image with “excessive personal significance”.⁵⁴ Kirchhoff suggests that Morris, for political and aesthetic reasons (which, to Morris, of course were indistinguishable), considers a focus on one aspect of an

⁵³ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, 233.

⁵⁴ Frederick Kirchhoff, ‘Terrors of the Third Dimension: William Morris and the Limits of Representation’, *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fall 1987), 80.

image, or even just one single image, to be an unhealthy worship of an individual entity, a “fixation” which “withdraws [one] from participation in history.”⁵⁵ However, the evocation of a flat plane image, where the lines of perspectives between the creator, the art work, and the consumer are not fixed, can also, as Kirchhoff notes, lead to a rather inhuman or machine-like position for the creator, as well as for the consumer, to inhabit. Morris’ solution, according to Kirchhoff, is a “process of socialization”, undercutting our sense of our own “uniqueness and consequent separation from the world around [us].”⁵⁶ Morris’ reader is thus called on not just to evoke an image of the past, but a highly particular form of image – a composite, perspective-less picture – in order that a process of “socialisation” or, perhaps rather, a shared aesthetic experience, be made possible. In a recent paper, Andrea Wolk Rager makes this point about the art of the pre-Raphaelites in general, and about the influence of Morris’ insistence on the social dimension of their art in particular: “The paintings take on the quality of a tapestry, tied together [...] by the minute realization of each equally privileged fictive material [...] rendering its very surface a declaration of egalitarianism and fellowship.”⁵⁷ I would argue that Morris’ early poetry took the notion of an art work’s decorative surface even further than to convey “fellowship” or “socialization”, but to indeed evoke an image which allows for no individual “viewpoint” at all. The reader must participate not just as a co-constructor of the past, but as a composite part of that image of the past, thereby participating also in re-creating the collaborative and non-individuated medieval mindset which Morris’ poetry seeks to evoke. The levelling between past and present, and between viewer and viewed, is thus ethical and social as well as aesthetic.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁷ Andrea Wolk Rager, “‘Smite this Sleeping World Awake’: Edward Burne-Jones and the Legend of the Briar Rose”, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Spring 2009), 448. Wolk Rager argues that Morris through his poetry inspired his closest friend Burne-Jones (even though they differed on political methods) to not only infuse his decorative art with social import, but to even treat the creation of decorative art *itself* as a politically significant act.

The second half of ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ continues to struggle with, and echo, the polarities which the two images, One of the choosing cloths, the other of the Queen and the garden. Those images present a dichotomy between the viewer as alone and stuck in a fixed perspectival relationship to the past, and that viewer as it becomes capable of viewing itself as part of a larger tapestry of past and present, and where the viewer and the viewed co-exist in a levelled relationship. Just after Guenevere’s “confession” of her and Launcelot’s kiss comes – famously and puzzlingly – the second of her three assertions that “Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie” (l.46, 142, 283), continuing: “Whatever happened on through all those years, / God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie” (ll.47-48, 143-144, 284-285). In between the latter two identical stanzas, Guenevere recalls a formidable catalogue of brave deeds by Gauwaine and the other Knights which differ either partly or significantly from Malory and other source texts; recalling several instances of when she has been falsely accused in the past, and of several ways in which they should consider her innocent in her relation to Launcelot. She reminds Gauwaine sternly of his mother’s death by his brother’s hand, and then abruptly recalls that there was a time when she had to defend the appearance of blood on her bed-sheets:

This Mellyagraunce saw blood upon my bed—
Whose blood then pray you? is there any law

To make a queen say why some spots of red
Lie on her coverlet? or will you say,
‘Your hands are white, lady, as when you wed,

Where did you bleed?’ and I must stammer out—‘Nay,
I blush indeed, fair lord, only to rend
My sleeve up to my shoulder, where there lay

A knife-point last night’: so must I defend
The honour of the lady Guenevere?

(ll.173-182)

Margaret Lowrie points out that the blood was, in Malory's version, of course Launcelot's, but since the accusation against Guenevere involved her with sleeping with another whole set of wounded knights who had attended her in her chamber, she remains innocent of the specifics of the charge. As with the choosing cloths, here Guenevere presents a contrast between two colours, red and white, as the measure by which we are to obtain truth about what happened in the past. But, for the second time, it becomes clear that the naming of the colours cannot help to determine what the truth of the situation is. Rightly or wrongly, Guenevere again shows that the ethical dilemma does not reside in determining "what happened", of whether she is guilty or innocent. She is innocent of the charge at hand, but – if we believe in Malory's and most other versions – guilty of receiving Launcelot in her chamber. Instead, the red and white colours as she contrasts them for their connotations of lust vs. chastity, guilt vs. innocence, directs her audience away from asking "what happened" through to asking something along the lines of "what was the *experience*". By her phrasing and expectant questioning, Guenevere asks her accusers, furthermore, in the same breath: "What will *you* do with my experience?"

Not long after, I suggest that there is an answer, of sorts. Guenevere goes on to recall how Launcelot fought with the knight Mellyagraunce, to free her from captivity and death by bonfire, and conquered him, which she suggests is a sign from God:

Therefore, my lords, take heed lest you be blent

With all this wickedness; say no rash word
Against me, being so beautiful; my eyes,
Wept all away to grey, may bring some sword

To drown you in your blood; see my breast rise,
Like waves of purple sea, as here I stand;
And how my arms are moved in wonderful wise,

Yea also at my full heart's strong command,
See through my long throat how the words go up
In ripples to my mouth; how in my hand

The shadow lies like wine within a cup
Of marvellously colour'd gold; yea now
This little wind is rising, look you up,

And wonder how the light is falling so
Within my moving tresses: will you dare,
When you have looked a little at my brow,

To say this thing is vile?

(ll.222-238)

As in the hypothetical scene of the garden, Guenevere seems to fall into a narcissistic deliberation on her own beauty, and a description of what sort of visual tableau she makes out to her observers. Lowrie reads the passage as Morris' celebration of the medieval idea that "beauty manifests the mind of God and is hence intrinsically virtuous."⁵⁸ Though the text certainly allows for that reading, I would suggest that the attention to Guenevere's beauty is of such a particular kind that we would also do well to remember, and contrast this with, the earlier scene in which the Queen portrays herself as part of an image. In the garden scene, she urged those looking at her to see what she was seeing, to look at how the beauties of the colours of nature intersected with the gold of her hair and the outlines of her hand, to form a picture so moving that it makes the Queen tremble. The current image also describes each part of her appearance, one by one, but the stanzas resonate in a very different register. All calls to look are drawing attention to movement, and to action, of some kind: her grey eyes threaten to become a sea of blood once they attract a sword to slay the erring Knights; from that "purple sea", which is also Guenevere's breast, she rises and watches her arms move, also in a wave movement; a motion which continues upward through her long throat, where finally even Guenevere's words are seen, visible to the eye, as corporeal manifestations. What is invisible can suddenly be seen: words travelling inside her throat, the wind, shadows.

⁵⁸ Margaret A. Lowrie, "Notes to "The Defence of Guenevere"", *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, 186.

Her hands are not just part of the sea, but can also be a cup “Of marvellously colour’d gold”, which of course must remind this audience of the Grail. The movement continues upwards, a “little wind rising” that brings us back to her hair, which this time is moving to mingle with light to make an image for the audience.

Here is, I argue, another evocation of medieval, perspective-less art to echo the crucial scene in the garden – though the tone, through its urgency, is different. Just as the blood and white of Guenevere’s bed recalls the earlier passage of the choosing cloths, these stanzas reverberate with the possibilities the poems set up earlier in the image of Guenevere in the garden. The scope here is more ambitious – the image of Guenevere transforms to become not just part of a garden scene, but of the world, which in turn transforms into parts of her body – but the purpose, I suggest, is the same. As Ingrid Hanson suggests, “[Guenevere’s] body is the means of interpretation, but its reactions are not entirely contiguous with external events, so that it suggests the possibility of an intersubjective reality.”⁵⁹ One level of the image evoked is one of extraordinary, at times supernatural, detail: insisting that we can see the words she forms “through” Guenevere’s throat, and observe the light as it falls *within* her “moving tresses”. At the same time, the movements are broad, like the sea and winds, implying that the image of Guenevere’s body can be a larger, overwhelming presence almost “filling up” the world. Again, as the reader called on to evoke the scene as an image, we are left without a fixed perspective, moving within one thought from very near to very far. If the image, the visual experience that the reader is asked to imagine and respond to, tries to evoke a flat surface, without a fixed perspective, it becomes more difficult for the “viewer” to imagine where we are in relation to the image.

⁵⁹ Ingrid Hanson, ““Bring me that kiss”: Incarnation and Truth in William Morris’ *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*”, *English: The Journal of the English Association*, Vol. 59, No. 227 (2010), 353.

We can thus get a sense of historical distance, and of pastness, through the image, without also locating ourselves at a fixed spatial remove from the image. As these lines show, it is impossible to determine whether we are very close, or perhaps located at a great distance from the image, or object. Though temporally, we sense that distance, spatially the distance is indeterminable. We can move our eyes over the whole image, unsure of where it ends and begins, and get different sense of historical distance, depending on what the image is, but we still cannot fix spatial, or visual, distance. Because the pattern-style image, without perspective, does not determine its edges, it is possible to imagine an image that is “everywhere”, thus allowing us to feel like the experience is around us, right next to us or even inside us – but the experience still depends on maintaining the sense of the past that the tightrope of historical distance sets up. The effect Morris creates is, once more, one of a non-individuated picture, with no clear borders or spatial distances between the viewer and the viewed.

The poem returns, in its last but four stanzas, to ironically echo Guenevere’s initial caution that “it seems but little skill / To talk of well-known things past now and dead.”

My maids were all about me, and my head
On Launcelot’s breast was being soothed away
From its white chattering, until Launcelot said—

‘By God! I will not tell you more to-day,
Judge any way you will – what matters it?
You know quite well the story of that fray,

How Launcelot still’d their bawling, the mad fit
That caught up Gauwaine—all, all, verily,
But just that which would save me; these things flit.’

(ll. 274-282)

Between these two, it is clear, what matters is not what happened or how we judge the past, “these things” that only “flit”. Indeed Launcelot in his distress resorts to the same argument as Guenevere – this is a well-known story, and so what the truth of each event was cannot

now possibly matter. The effect is to push the reader out, to remind us that we are at a historical remove from whatever happened, a past which can never regain its immediacy, and therefore its evidentiary value. Through the remainder of the poem the reader is again relegated to the “outside”, being told that Guenevere refuses to speak any more and that probably she is silent because she can hear Launcelot riding in to save her:

Her cheek grew crimson, as the headlong speed
Of the roan charger drew all men to see,
The knight who came was Launcelot at good need.
(ll.293-295)

Many readers, past and present, have found that ending disappointingly sudden and abrupt. Reinforcing the redundancy of Guenevere’s elaborately structured defence as simple prevarication, the final stanza appears to leave the reader, already rejected from the past by Launcelot’s dismissal – “what matters it?” – of the things that flit, at a loss and abruptly alone. We, as reader, end as we began, by peering at the mystery of Guenevere and her past from the outside, mediated only in the first and last few stanzas through an unknown observer, or narrator, of the Queen’s trial. It may feel like a rude awakening, but I suggest that the effect is crucial to a reading of the poem which is to introduce a reader to Morris’ sense of the past in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. Recall Morris’ review of Browning’s *Men and Women*, how he praises the poems’ ability to depict its historical characters “rescued from the judgement of the world”.⁶⁰ The ending of ‘The Defence’ shows that, though Launcelot is waiting in the wings, it is essential that the reader participates to help “rescue” Guenevere. The judgement of contemporaries, Morris argues, “charts us all in broad blacks and whites”.⁶¹ The text’s incompleteness as it stands on its own must be filled in

⁶⁰ William Morris, ‘Review of *Men and Women*’, 269.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 269.

with visual detail, and colours, supplied by the reader's ability to help, and participate in, evoking images of the past.

This chapter has highlighted three aspects of William Morris' poetry that are particularly prominent in 'The Defence of Guenevere': firstly, the constant reminder of historical distance, which in fact serves as a way for the reader to relate, and connect with, the past of the text. Secondly, I have shown that the references to experiencing the past visually actually draw attention to the absence of actual images. Finally, I have pointed to the ethical value of a perspective-less, continuous surface as a way of encouraging a particular kind of collaborative engagement between the reader and the text. When understood together, I argue that these features show that Morris' early poetry utilises its seemingly narrow range of images and scenes in order to offer to the reader an experience of a broadly collaborative and even collective engagement with the past. 'The Defence' shows us that when the poem is read as an image it has the potential become a collaboration between the reader and the text, wherein the past is not used to mirror, or make sense of, the present, but is in itself created as a decorative surface, outlining the ethical stakes of Morris' insistence of the value of arts such as tapestry-making and wallpaper design. The model presented in the symbolic allegories of red and blue, and red and white, is rejected, in favour of an image in which historical distance is crucial, but perspective remains unfixed and undetermined.

Chapter 3

Optical Illusions: George Eliot's Romance of Distance

Introduction: Illusions and Romance in the Nineteenth Century

Through a discussion of Thomas Carlyle's works and their relationship to the historical novel, the first chapter of this thesis shows that the visual evocation of the past in British nineteenth-century literature is not necessarily tied to a certain genre, but to a sense of historical distance, expressed through engaging the reader's visual imagination, that can be found across genres and modes throughout the century. The ensuing chapter about William Morris further explores the visual interplay between reader and text, as Morris establishes a firm historical distance between the contemporary reader and the Arthurian and Froissartian past of his poetry. The reader's active engagement is required to help fill in the "missing" blanks of Morris' visual canvas, and to connect across that distance.

The first half of the thesis thus focuses on what I consider successful attempts at connecting the reader's visual imagination with the sense of the past evoked by the texts. These writers establish a certain relationship to historical distance that is sustained consistently throughout their texts. For all their idiosyncrasies and potential inaccessibility to uninitiated readers, the historical works of Carlyle and Morris do manage to effectively convey a particularly Victorian desire to, in Macaulay's words, "make the past present, bring the distant near."¹ Throughout both chapters, I have argued that the very idea that the sense of a distance, a chasm, that must be bridged, is characteristic of the nineteenth-century's particular mode of historicity in Britain, and that this is the way of relating to the past which we have inherited from the Victorians, and still rely on today. In effect, I show that historical

¹ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Hallam' (1828) in *The Works of Lord Macaulay: Critical and Historical Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, 1875), 163.

distance functions paradoxically as a connecting, rather than alienating, device between the reader and the text. The current chapter puts that argument to the test by exploring George Eliot's *Romola* (1861-62), a historical novel infamous for its sense of historical distance that to many readers comes across more as a dead weight of antiquarian detachment rather than as a thrilling experience of difference between the past of the text and the present of the reader.

By the nineteenth century, the purpose of historiography and historical literature had become to resurrect the past, rather than to hold up a mirror the present, or to present a teaching lesson from the past. Consequently, the particular details of what made the past different from the present came to matter deeply. And nowhere in British nineteenth-century historical fiction, arguably, have the specific and visually evocative details of the past been allowed such free reign as in *Romola*. For example, in the much-maligned chapter titled 'A Face In The Crowd', San Giovanni – “whose image was on the fair gold florins” – is celebrated with a day-long procession designed to display Florence's technical virtuosity in illusion-making. Through feats of engineering and design, “angels seemed [...] to have brought their piece of the heavens down into the narrow streets, and to pass slowly through them; and, more wonderful still, saints of gigantic size, with attendant angels might be seen [...] moving in a slow mysterious manner along the streets”². The narrator then goes on to reveal how all these miraculous visions are created: the clouds are woven cloth, the saints and cherubs are “unglorified mortals” supported by bars and the giant apparitions are in fact men on stilts wearing masks. But this spectacle, though acknowledged as an illusion, should not be revealed in its tawdry technicalities; only “a miserably unimaginative” reader would consider doing so. Instead, the narrator goes on to challenge the reader about to dismiss the

² George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Dorothea Barrett (London: Penguin, 2005), 82. All subsequent references will be given in brackets in the text.

Florentines as gullible, because is there not “in the images of sacred things”, they ask, “the virtue of sacred things themselves?” (83).

This is an idea that the novel returns to again and again; illusions, even when proven false, are repeatedly suggested to be legitimate ways of looking at the world. In fact, the entire city of Florence transforms into a spectacle next: a “glorious show” where a blue tent is draped over almost the entire city to appear as the sky. The real sky hides above it and their blue colours merge if viewed from above. As a culmination to the sights provided for entertainment are two “whirling towers”, hollow so that “men could stand inside and whirl them continually, so as to produce the phantasmagoric effect, which, considering the towers were numerous, must have been calculated to produce dizziness on a truly magnificent scale” (88). Alongside this mirage is a continuous stream of faces passing by Romola’s husband-to-be Tito, and their artist friends Nello and Piero. It is clear from their conversation that they consider the faces of the crowd an integral part of the spectacle and, in good Florentine fashion, analyse the people in conjunction with the optical illusions on display. Tito glimpses two significantly familiar faces. First, he is fixed by a “gaze that seemed to have more meaning in it than the ordinary passing observation”(86). This is later revealed to be Romola’s brother Dino. Secondly, Tito sees his secret lover Tessa’s face, almost immediately lost again in the crowd “where profiles turned as sharply from north to south as weathercocks under a shifting wind”(92).

‘A Face in the Crowd’ is structured entirely around a series of descriptions of the optical illusions on display in the day-long parade. The two encounters between Tito and the two other characters turn out to be insignificant in terms of the plot; neither Dino nor Tessa recognise Tito, and no action ensues as a direct result. Tito is privy to a magnificent display of visual variety of both public and private illusions during the San Giovanni procession. But none of what he sees leads to any particular psychological illuminations for Tito’s character –

it does not occur to him to question the visual gap between the men on stilts carrying the whirling towers, and what they seek to represent to the Florentine people. The two are only legible to him as separate entities and hold no unified message. Instead, the chapter can exemplify the criticism levelled against *Romola* since its first publication: it is overstuffed with the details of art, appearances and spectacles of fourteenth-century Florence, for seemingly no good reason except to show off the author's historical knowledge. To others it may appear, as Hilary Fraser has written, that the novel's "narrative space is as heavily populated, as sumptuously decorated, as the Renaissance city-state it attempts to evoke"³. But even its admirers tend to fall in two camps: they either read *Romola* as a sort of realist novel gone mad, obsessively stuffed to the brim with historically accurate Barthesian reality effects, or as a dreamy symbolist romance, where psychological plausibility must take a back seat to set-pieces of historical picturesque and spectacle.⁴

Both these views are valid. But in this chapter, I want to suggest another way to approach the novel. As many readers have noted, the excessively catalogued details that crowd the text and illustrations of *Romola* tend to produce a sense of detachment, or distance, for the reader, rather than bring us in closer contact with the novel's imagined past. That detachment is identifiable as one version of the historical distance that so interested nineteenth-century historical writers, and which the first half of my thesis explores – but I propose that the distance conveyed in Eliot's novel is particular to romance. Consequently I

³ Hilary Fraser, 'Titian's Il Bravo and George Eliot's Tito: A Painted Record', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (September 1995), 210.

⁴ In *George Eliot and the Landscape of Time: Narrative Form and Protestant Apocalyptic History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), Mary Wilson Carpenter writes that "only recently have critics begun to consider the work as something other than a conventional historical novel – a form in which many have judged it a failure" (60). Since Carpenter's book, there have been some notable defences of the novel, for example Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) and the influential essays collected in *From Author to Text: Re-reading George Eliot's Romola*, ed. Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998) and, to some extent, Melissa Ann Raines, *George Eliot's Grammar of Being* (London: Anthem, 2011). These books take different views and employ radically dissimilar methodologies, but have in common a passionate investment in "rescuing" the novel from being considered a failure of one kind or another.

argue that *Romola* evokes a certain kind of historical distance that works, and is made possible, on the level of genre. I am not making a case for *Romola* to be understood as a conscious imitation of medieval romance, but I am proposing that Eliot's novel reflects a particularly Victorian perception of romance, characterized by a sense of highly visualized historical distance that remains – unlike other genres of Victorian historical writings – at a remove, even when the reader's visual imagination has been engaged.

Additionally, I show how Frederick Leighton's illustrations, and his painstaking collaboration with Eliot during their production, offer their own interpretation of romance; treating the genre as a form of history rather than as a universalizing story of archetypes. His images, particularly of Romola herself, reflect the process by which a hero of medieval romance undergoes an *aventure*, a series of what Judith Johnston calls "performing tasks", typically of a religious kind, that seem to be disconnected episodes but ultimately share a unity of purpose.⁵ Read this way, Leighton's series of images can help a modern reader relate to the strange shifts in tone within *Romola*, where dream-like narration lacking in dialogue or interiority of character is followed by passages by learned outbursts of antiquarian detail about the historical period in which it is set.

The romance, I argue, addresses an insider audience of its own time, about the specific and even ephemeral or faddish concerns of its own time period. But in order for the text to really function as a romance, the present-day reader must be at a significant temporal distance from the implied reader, that is the intended audience, addressed in the work. I show that the genre of romance in fact hinges on a vital discrepancy between the implied past

⁵ Judith Johnston, *George Eliot and the Discourses of Medievalism* (Brepols: Turnhout, Belgium, 2006), 127. Here, Johnston is describing the parallels between the character of Daniel Deronda and the knights of medieval prose romances, but I suggest – when viewing the novels overall rather than focusing on particular characters – that her account works just as well, if not better, when applied to *Romola*.

reader and the “real” modern-day reader – and that this discrepancy is temporal at heart.⁶

Romola’s romance elements are expressed through constant references to visual illusions of various kinds, both through the text and via the medium of Leighton’s illustrations. The details of Florentine renaissance life of course take many forms; the reader’s imaginary senses of smell, hearing and taste are evoked alongside our mind’s eye (although, it must be said, with much less frequency). There is also a way to read the novel in which the textual archive is the privileged form of knowledge and truth about the world. But I think there is a strong case to be made for the genre of *Romola* being performed through its relationship to visuality, and more particularly to a visualized form of historical distance. We see it set up in the ‘Proem’ and, as I will show, the pattern repeats throughout the text. The ‘Proem’ presents optical illusions as a part of late-medieval Florentine city life, but the text itself also performs a certain kind of visual trickery, layering the past and present in the reader’s mind’s eye.

Because of the constant interplay between ‘the real’ and ‘the ideal’ that makes up the genre of romance, the visual appearances of the past take on a particular significance; the “well-lined black silk garment” and “plain cloth cap” of the Florentine Spirit is historically accurate to fifteenth-century fashion for wealthy merchants, but it is also evoked as a way to dramatise symbolically, and aesthetically, the complex soul of the fifteenth-century city (2). This illustrates how optical illusions and painterly spectacles help the novel convey the detachment between implied and present-day reader inherent in the genre of romance.

⁶ I will go on to discuss how I use the concept of “implied reader” in more detail below, particularly in the context of Wolfgang Iser’s theory of *Leerstellen* and how I see that related to medieval romance. But I want to also stress here that Iser’s account of the “implied reader” does not purport to reveal the actual identity of either a work’s implied or real readers; in *The Act of Reading*, he writes that the implied reader “is a construct and in no way identified with any real reader [...] the real reader is always offered a particular role to play [in the text] and it is this role that constitutes the concept of an implied reader (34)”. Iser thus proposes a contrast between two readers: the implied, and the real, or actual, reader. But since even the “real” reader is a construct, a “role” that is played out, they *both* remain importantly hypothetical. I try to mark the hypothetical status of my own opposition of the medieval reader and a reader of *Romola* by referring to implied or past, vs. modern- or present-day, readers. I am grateful to Nicholas Dames for the crucial shift in terms between “actual” or “real” to “modern” or “present-day.” See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

Through my analysis of the sense of the past in two vital scenes and illustrations of *Romola*'s final section, 'Romola's Waking' and 'Drifting 'Away', I further argue that illusions in this text are consequently a helpmate instead of a hindrance for the present reader. Rather than layers, or deceptive masks, to be peeled off, optical illusions and visual spectacle attempt to express the novel's "truth" in the sense that they are part of the very fabric of the text, of its genre, and serve as the reader's avenue through which to access and explore the past.

There are not many nineteenth-century scholarly accounts of romance that go beyond readings of medieval literature. But two years before *Romola* began its serialized run, UCL professor David Masson published *British Novelists and Their Styles*, a contribution to the body of work building the emerging academic discipline of English literature. In his analysis of what makes a good novel, Masson attempts a distinction between romance and the novel:

I have not hitherto recognized this distinction [between the genres of romance and novel], nor do I care to recognize it very strictly, because, after all, it is one more of popular convenience than of invariable fitness. [...] now, when we speak of a Romance, we generally mean "a fictitious narrative, in prose or verse, the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents;" and, when we speak of the Novel, we generally mean "a fictitious narrative differing from the Romance, inasmuch as the incidents are accommodated to the ordinary train of events and *the modern state of society.*" (my italics)⁷

Masson's initial unwillingness to distinguish between the two is in part a defense of the romance as a worthwhile project. His definition seems similar to what we would expect in a work of modern criticism, until we get to the last sentence: here it becomes clear that Masson specifies a novel (in opposition to a romance) to have a modern setting. He continues to defend the romance on the strength of what it describes, using highly visual terms: "much of the interest depends on the author's power of description, i.e. on his faculty in the imagination of scenery". Modern novels rightly describe what we see and know, he suggests,

⁷ David Masson, *British Novelists and Their Styles: Being a Critical Sketch of the History of British Prose Fiction* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1859), 26.

in the form of cramped urban buildings and streets, prosaic counting-houses and “the quiet street of a village”. These are all scenes that, as known contemporary settings, require little imaginative participation from the reader. But surely, he continues, novelists and poets alike should also paint scenes that are nowadays much less familiar to us, and thus “we should be taken away in imagination from our common social haunts, and placed in situations where Nature still exerts upon Humanity the unbroken magnetism of her inanimate bulk”, where we can “[tell] tales of the past in some solitary crumbling ruin”. This, according to Masson, is of “medicinal” value to the modern reader who through the romance can find a channel through which to escape their cramped lives “stuck in this part or that of the crowded machinery of complex civilization.”⁸

It may seem remarkable that Masson does not address the potential contradiction inherent in separating works set in the past and the present in this manner; the historical novel had, for the past fifty years, straddled both categories of fiction to the extent that they did not necessarily describe anything “marvelous”, in the sense of supernatural or otherworldly, but nor did they usually adhere to the “ordinary train of events” that Masson finds in “modern” society. But although he began by drawing distinctions between the Novel and the Romance, Masson thinks of novelists as capable of producing both romance and narratives of “modern” life, clearly juxtaposing romance to works dealing with the present. Masson’s discussion shows that to a nineteenth-century critic, the important contrast is not between romance and realism, but between romance, as in works that are set in the past, and novels of contemporary life. Masson shows us that our modern (implicit or explicit) comparisons between romance and nineteenth-century “realism” are, at best, anachronistic; to a nineteenth-century reader, romance is an established, familiar genre, but “realism” is not, and does not hold up well as an opposition to romance. Consequently, a modern comparison

⁸ Masson, 27-28.

between the two is rather misleading about the context in which nineteenth-century critics, authors and readers situate romance.

This chapter accordingly considers the status of the genre of romance in relation to our critical models of the nineteenth-century historical novel, and, more speculatively, to George Eliot's sense of the past as it comes across to us in her text. *Romola* is known – and criticized – as Eliot's "hyperrealist" project in the sense that the pleasure of its fictionality is weighed down by the excess of historically accurate details and an antiquarian obsession with factual counterparts to each scene and character. Ever since Georg Lukàcs' influential suggestion that the historical novel entered a rapid decline after Scott, it has been common to follow the logic of that timeline and consequently consider *Romola* as representative of the English historical novel's crisis of authenticity in the mid-century.⁹ A widespread critical narrative about its inception is that Eliot wanted to resuscitate a formerly respectable genre, but ran into difficulties when faced with the tightening standards of professionalized historical writing; she found that the standards of historical accuracy that had worked for Scott would not do for a mid-century audience. Her options were to either dismiss historical verisimilitude altogether and create a fantasy version of the past, or to turn her novel into a document of verified historical research. The novel's detractors have suggested that she ended up doing both. In this reading, "realism" – at least that genre's supposed hallmark characteristic of an abundance of credible, descriptive detail – is what weighs down the novel and turns it into "Eliot's historical novel", in implicit contrast to her other works – although they are also, with a few exceptions, set in the past.¹⁰ Certainly, all Eliot's novels published

⁹ See Georg Lukàcs, *The Historical Novel*, transl. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

¹⁰ For a recent example, see Brian Hamnett, *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Representations of Reality in History and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Hamnett devotes a chapter entitled 'Two experiments in myth and history' to a comparison between *Romola* and Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862). Though he does acknowledge that Eliot's other novels were also set in the past, he considers *Romola*, like *Salammbô*, a much more typical example of historical fiction, in the sense that it (unlike the rest of

before *Romola* were set in the past, albeit of a much closer kind; none went further back than the late eighteenth century, nor strayed outside the national boundaries of the British Isles.

But *Romola* is also equally condemned as an almost ahistorically dreamlike romance, where implausibilities in plot and character, and also a lack of psychological interiority, detract from the connection a modern reader might otherwise have made.¹¹

Romola thus provides an excellent test case for the confusions surrounding the relationship between the highbrow, or literary, historical novel and romance, in the nineteenth century.¹² Even this cursory summary of recent responses to *Romola* shows that our contemporary critical taxonomy that opposes the nineteenth-century historical novel (when implicitly treated as a “realist” genre), with the romance makes the task of understanding the problem of *Romola* very difficult. We risk falling into the same old trap of simply drawing up lists of pros and cons of the novel, dismissing the elements we don’t like as belonging to the other “bad” genre. I bring this up because my current project obviously runs a similar risk; I

the respective author’s oeuvre) treats “the human experience through historical time” (217). Elsewhere in the book, Hamnett is explicit about his attitude to romance and, like many critics, treats the term as almost synonymous with romanticism: “Romanticism held the historical novel in a dangerous embrace, which ultimately threatened to destroy it altogether. Romanticism contained powerful strains of fantasy and romance. Romance took the historical novel away from realistic history and serious issues into the realm of popular entertainment” (179). I think Hamnett’s contempt for romance, and his disappointment with *Romola* (he proposes, perhaps unconsciously echoing F.R. Leavis, that if Eliot had focused on the anti-hero and thus turned the novel into *Tito Melema* it would have made a much livelier and more interesting novel than *Romola*), are entirely connected: like the critics I discuss below, he wishes for the elements he doesn’t like (the romance elements) to disappear, or to at least be treated as failed elements of the genre he prefers, which in this case is realism.

¹¹ In her introduction to the novel, Barrett suggests that Hawthorne’s romance influence on *Romola* “constitutes a genuine loss” to the novel’s ability to bring the past to accurate and credible life (xv). While I think she is right that the romance elements makes the novel much less accessible and immediately readable than Eliot’s more realist historical novels like *Middlemarch* and *Adam Bede*, I resist the idea that there is a laxness which causes the narrative to somehow slip, or descend, into romance from its high perch of realist potential. As Barrett also acknowledges, Eliot calls *Romola* a romance from the beginning in her notes and letters, and I think that designation is significant enough to make it unreasonable to treat the novel as a failed realist text.

¹² Of course there are many examples of Victorian historical novels that are described as “romances” by modern critics. Interestingly, there seems to be a qualitative difference at stake: these novels tend to contain a much higher degree of pulp than any text produced by Thackeray, Dickens, Gaskell or Eliot. Like their more highbrow peers, authors like Ainsworth, Charles Reade, G.P.R. James and Bulwer-Lytton were strongly influenced by Scott, but their historical fictions are frequently referred to by modern scholarship as historical romances, or even just romances. For examples of the modern critical division of nineteenth-century “good” realist fiction, and “bad” romance, see Andrew Sanders, *The Historical Novel 1840-1880* (London: Macmillan, 1978) and John Bowen, ‘The Historical Novel’ in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005). Blackwell References Online, accessed 2nd February 2014. <http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/book.html?id=g9781405132916_9781405132916>

am arguing that *Romola* should be understood largely as a romance, thus explaining the elements that other critics have seen as flaws to rather be the effects of adhering to a particular genre. However, I mean for this chapter to show that the focus of my argument is not on which genre *Romola* ultimately belongs to *more* than the others, but on how the genre of romance is an important element in our understanding of Eliot's text, because it is what helps her novel express a sense of historical distance, in particular through its visual evocation of the historical milieu that addresses itself to an implied reader that is part of, rather than outside of, that setting.¹³

Savonarola's Florence: Optical Illusions of Sameness and Difference

Already in the 'Proem', the novel's commitment to optical illusions is set up as an entry-point for the reader into the sense of historical distance that the rest of the novel tries to convey. A Florentine citizen of the fifteenth century is imagined overlooking George Eliot's contemporary Florence: "as he looks at the scene before him, the sense of familiarity is so much stronger than the perception of change"(2). That which has changed, for example the towers "that once surmounted the [city] walls", is wilfully ignored – "his eye will not dwell on that blank" – and instead his gaze seeks that which has remained the same. But soon the resurrected Florentine must admit the confusion he feels at the changes that have occurred. Why are certain gates closed, most of the towers levelled, and a spire added to Santa Croce – in short, why has the city changed at all? The narrator admits that "[t]hese are difficult

¹³ Recently, there have been quite a few critical accounts that perform a re-evaluation of the novel's genre, for example Royce Mahawatte, *George Eliot and the Gothic Novel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013) and Mary Beth Tegan, 'Strange Sympathies: George Eliot and the Literary Science of Creation', *Women's Writing*, Vol. 2, Issue 2 (May 2013), 168-185, which reads *Romola* as sensation fiction. While I find these readings fascinating, I want to again distinguish my project from those that set as their goal to re-classify the novel's genre. I think the romance elements of *Romola* have been neglected and to some extent misread, because they have not been sufficiently connected to the novel's sense of the past as a feature of style rather than just as a background setting. However, my argument in no way excludes the possibility of other genres playing equally significant roles within our understanding of what the novel is, and can be.

questions: it is easier and pleasanter to recognise the old than to account for the new”(3). The panoramic view of Florence functions here as an archive of sorts, where the fifteenth-century citizen’s recollections of Florence are stored visually alongside the nineteenth-century narrator’s impressions. Together, their images form a so-called myriorama, a vertical montage of a segmented panorama, where continuity is found, because however many sections of the picture are interchanged, the horizon view remains the same: “[the city] has hardly changed its outline since the days of Columbus”(1).¹⁴ The transformation of the city’s appearance, the narrator assures us and the Florentine Spirit, is a mere surface illusion and as soon as the images of the different eras are slotted together into a myrioramic view, the changes caused by the passing of time are revealed as merely two visual layers illuminating the same transparent picture: “Only look at the sunlight and shadows on the grand walls that were built solidly, and have endured in their grandeur [...] look, if you will, into the churches and hear the same chants, see the same images as of old [...] These images have not changed”(7). The passing of time is an optical illusion that, if you only learn how to look at it correctly, will illuminate the timelessness concealed underneath.

The narrator insists that the Florentine Spirit would not be able to sense much difference between fifteenth-century and modern inhabitants of Florence, and not even the city’s architecture looks particularly different. But when she describes what the Florentine Spirit looks like, and what he is wearing, we begin to suspect that the Spirit actually belongs to an extremely specific time and place. He is dressed in the black that Florence was famous for during a period when black dye was extremely exclusive, and Florence, for a brief time, had a trade monopoly on the distribution of alum (2).¹⁵ And as the narrator gazes with the

¹⁴ See Laurent Mannoni, Werner Nekes and Marina Warner, *Eyes, Lies and Illusions* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004), 216-17 for a visual and descriptive account of how the myriorama worked and of its enormous popularity in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century.

¹⁵ See Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 131.

Spirit across the buildings, the matching of past and present looks turns into more like a puzzle than a perfect fit:

He sees other familiar objects much closer to his daily walks. For though he misses the seventy or more towers that once surmounted the walls, and encircled the city as with a regal diadem, *his eyes will not dwell on that blank*; they are drawn irresistibly to the unique tower springing, like a tall flower-stem drawn towards the sun, from the square turreted mass of the Old Palace in the very heart of the city – the tower that looks none the worse for the four centuries that have passed since he used to walk under it. (2-3, my italics)

Even though the narrator assures us that Florence and its inhabitants remain the same across history, there are visual signs that time brings change, which worries the Spirit enough that he has to decide to look away from what has changed, and deliberately seek out those outlines that look similar. The reason for his anxiety is that difference and change is much harder to explain than what has remained the same:

Why have five out of the eleven convenient gates been closed? And why, above all, should the towers have been levelled that were once a glory and defence? Is the world become so peaceful, then, and do Florentines dwell in such harmony, that there are no longer conspiracies to bring ambitious exiles home again with armed bands at their back? These are difficult questions: it is easier and pleasanter to recognise the old than to account for the new (3).

We can go back to Eliot's essay 'The Natural History of German Life' to see why changes to external appearances are important and indeed a potential source of worry. In 'Natural History', Eliot praises Riehl's organic interpretation of society across history, he considers the "external" and "internal" "conditions" of human experience to be closely related; the external conditions – those aspects that have visibly changed across time – of life are expressions of the "internal" changes of a more philosophical, intellectual and perhaps even emotional nature. They are intertwined and cannot be separated, which is why Eliot has believed that change must be gradual, and at an equal pace between internal and external developments. The most important aspect for the purposes of my argument is that Eliot

clearly sees that so-called “external” aspects of life – changing fashions of appearances, buildings, and art, for example, but also various technological and cultural changes – are bound up in the internal aspects of life. They are not just surface, which we must peel back to uncover the real life going on underneath. When a building in Florence is torn down, leaving a “blank” for the spectator’s gaze, that is not just some sort of metaphoric or symbolic representation of social or intellectual change. External change *is* change, and will produce historical progress as much as a change of government or religious upheaval.¹⁶

Much later, Eliot was to write that she desired something similar for *fictional* representation of historical progress and change: “The exercise of a veracious imagination in historical picturing seems to be capable of a development that might help the judgment greatly with regard to present and future events.”¹⁷ If we take that note-book entry as referring back to her historical experiment with *Romola*, it is reasonable to assume that a “veracious imagination” that seeks to evoke a “historical picture[e]” of some kind must be sensitively attuned to ways of seeing in themselves as markers of historicity. Hilary Fraser reads the entry as directly related to what she sees as Eliot steering “a judicious path between history proper and romance” in *Romola*, citing Lewes’ contemptuous review of Alexandre Dumas’ romances from 1848 as evidence for her dismissal of the genre of romance.¹⁸ However, I think Eliot’s letter to John Blackwood about the initial idea for the novel should complicate the modern critic’s use of the juxtaposition between “history” and “romance”:

“Mr. Lewes has encouraged me to persevere in the project, saying that I should probably do something in historical romance rather different in character from what has been done

¹⁶ George Eliot, ‘The Natural History of German Life’ (1856) in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A.S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 2005), 107-140.

¹⁷ George Eliot, ‘Historic Imagination’ in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 446.

¹⁸ Hilary Fraser, ‘Writing the Past’, *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1830-1914*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 118.

before.”¹⁹ We thus find that Eliot’s treatment of the genre of romance is vital to the very idea of *Romola*. We can take that further and suggest that, by layering ways of seeing from past and present in the ‘Proem’, Eliot is trying to achieve the task outlined in her essay:

I want something different from the abstract treatment which belongs to grave history from a doctrinal point of view, and something different from the schemed picturesqueness of ordinary historical fiction. I want brief, severely conscientious reproductions, in their concrete incidents, of pregnant movements in the past.²⁰

This is a crucial condition of historicity throughout *Romola*, and one inextricably linked to the novel’s generic status as a romance. By offering the myrioramic view of old and new Florence as a visual puzzle, or illusion, for the reader to solve, she gives us a way in to that world, a clue about how the Spirit’s visuality differs from our own; the Proem sets up Eliot’s particular concept of romance as a closed world of the past, so steeped in historical details and specificity that any modern reader must learn to *see* like a fifteenth-century Florentine if they are to stand any chance of understanding the story that follows. Contrary to the reader’s assumptions, the narrator is not there to mediate or bridge the gap between past and present, but to simply point to the gap and ask us to make the imaginative leap: wearing black silk is as much a part of what makes the Florentine Spirit representation of fifteenth-century character as his belief in the occult. Where the architecture of his city changes, the thoughts and emotions of its inhabitants also follow suit. Therefore visual illusions, like the myriorama produced by the Spirit’s layering of modern and fifteenth-century outlines of Florence, are there to explain and reveal, rather than hide, the “pregnant movements of the past” Eliot sought to represent. As we will see, the Proem evokes a pattern repeated throughout the text: Tessa’s marriage is an illusory spectacle, but is never revealed – nor treated by the text – as a fraud. Nor are the villagers who take Romola for a vision of a saint ever disabused of their

¹⁹ Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol.3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956-78), 339.

²⁰ George Eliot, ‘Historic Imagination’, 447.

false impression. Instead, the visual illusions that litter the pages of *Romola* help to point toward a very different way of seeing from the reader's own; they reveal the temporal discrepancy between the implied late-medieval romance reader, and the present-day reader, which to this novel lies at the heart of the genre of romance.

Written as a conscious imitation of older forms of romance, the relationship between reader and genre in *Romola* is used to present what I consider particularly Victorian notions about the visual imagination and historical distance. Romance in its most narrowly defined form originally refers to the genre of the narrative poem that emerged in twelfth-century France, concerned with chivalric pursuits and quests involving religion, love and adventure. However, since the early years of the nineteenth century, when the Romantics helped to revive the form in both poetry and prose, the term romance has come to suggest a much broader field of literary endeavor. Barbara Fuchs argues that since the Romantics, and in particular since the critical genre studies by Northrop Frye and Fredric Jameson in the second half of the twentieth century, romance has come to imply a literary strategy as well as a genre. She proposes that we should follow the poststructuralists to “consider romance in terms of what it performs as opposed to what it is.”²¹ Part of my purpose in analyzing romance in *Romola* is to show that there is not necessarily an opposition between defining a work in terms of “what it is”, that is its genre, and “what it performs”, in the sense of the textual patterns we can pick up and identify within the work. Here I build on Gillian Beer's study of romance, where she argues that the genre “depends considerably upon a certain set *distance* in the relationship between its audience and its subject-matter.”²² It is defined by its relationship to the reader, which Beer considers as one of *temporal* distance:

I have limited the description [of romance] to works which were commonly described by other writers *of the same period* or by the author himself as “a romance.” I

²¹ Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

²² Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970), 5.

emphasize the first condition because the realistic novels of one age or audience have an uncanny way of becoming ‘romances’ in another setting. (Richardson’s *Pamela* and Trollope’s novels are examples.) This is because romance depends considerably upon a certain set *distance* in the relationship between its audience and its subject-matter.²³

Romance addresses itself to its own contemporaries, but is read by “later generations”; there exists a crucial gap between the time in which the work was produced, and the present of the current reader. Regardless of whether you address what the genre is, or what it performs, the genre of romance thus finds historical distance at its core. Beer’s definition also helps us to see the ways in which romance, as it was used by mid-nineteenth century authors like George Eliot, conveys that distance as a temporal gap not just between the historical subject-matter and modern reader, but between the implied and actual reader of the text. The premise of the implied reader can help us understand more about the genre of romance as it applies to the nineteenth-century historical novel because, I suggest, the romance as a genre depends on the distance between reader and text – a space that, according to Wolfgang Iser, is inhabited by the implied reader. I use Iser’s term of implied reader here in the context of his concept of *Leerstellen*, which I take to mean gaps or spaces within a text that allow, or even demand of, a reader to fill in a blank with their imagination, thereby interacting with the text to construct their own imaginative version of what can be seen on the page. The present-day reader of *Romola* is invited to resemble the implied reader by filling in such a gap.²⁴

²³ Beer, 5. Beer suggests that romance can only take its true form through the passing of time, through the “certain set distance” between its own age and whoever is its current audience. With that in mind it seems to me that using, say, Chretien de Troyes’ definition of romance in order to define French twelfth-century romance, is probably misleading. We would be better off following Beer’s initial suggestion to look ahead and see what is transformed, by the centuries passing, *into* romance. Part of the problem of *Romola* is, of course, that the “certain set distance” is produced as a conscious imitation of historical distance rather than as an effect of time passing between the work’s first intended audience, and its (actual) modern reader.

²⁴ See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, transl. Wolfgang Iser and David Henry Wilson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). It may seem counterintuitive to apply Iser’s theory to romance, as a typically medieval genre, because Iser’s test cases consist entirely of eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century English novels, and he is open about the centrality of the (realist) novel to his argument. However, I am by no means the first writer to apply Iser’s “implied reader” to the genre of romance; a few notable examples across several periods of study include

While I am not drawing direct parallels between medieval texts and *Romola*, it is worth pointing out that the elaborate accounts of visual spectacle found throughout Eliot's novel are strikingly familiar to readers of medieval romance. Eliot's lengthy descriptions of tableaux, parades, paintings and city panoramas can seem almost ritualistic in their irrelevance to the plot, and we may find similar instances in medieval romances. For example, in an early episode of Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec and Enide*, Erec asks Queen Guinevere to provide his poor but worthy lady love Enide with a new dress:

The queen promptly led her to her private chamber and at once had brought to her the new tunic and the mantle of rich green cloth with the cross pattern, which had been tailored for her personally. The man to whom she had given the order brought her the mantle and the tunic, which was lined with white ermine – even in the sleeves. At the wrists and neck there were, clearly visible, more than two hundred marks of beaten gold, and gems of great presence – violet and green, deep blue and grey-brown – were everywhere set upon the gold.²⁵

We subsequently follow Enide as she poses for the dress and mantle to be made and then decides, through the process of trying them on, which accessories will suit her new outfit. We even meet the man tasked with attaching ribbons to the mantle, described as “a past master at his craft”(57). Readers of romance will be familiar with the superlatives attached to each stage of the dress fitting – the “superbly fine” mantle, “ornately prepared” ribbons, gems “of great presence”, and of course Enide and Erec themselves who, even before Enide's courtly make-over to equal her lover's splendour, are described as “never were two such beautiful figures brought together by law or by marriage”(57,56). The description runs to almost three

Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand, *Topographies of Gender in Middle High German Romance* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), Patricia E. Grieve, *Floire and Blancheflor' and the European Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Helen Hughes, *The Historical Romance 1890-1990* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Sterling-Hellenbrand directly correlates Iser's *Leerstellen* with the mysticism of medieval Arthurian romance, see her 'Introduction'. Hughes finds in her analysis of the 1890s romance revival that it is characterized by how “the imagined reader, in Iser's term, is set at some distance from the imagined world” (24).

²⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide in Arthurian Romances*, ed. William W. Kibler (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 57. All subsequent references will be given in brackets in the text. This romance is believed to be composed in the 1170s or 1180s, but the oldest manuscript we have dates from approximately fifty years later.

pages in total and, short of serving as the medieval version of the lifestyles of the rich and famous, appears to be of puzzlingly little value to the progress of the story, considering the significance the narrator appears to give to each stage of the fitting. The account culminates with Enide proclaimed the most beautiful maiden in the realm (again) and – as a consequence somewhat unclear to a modern reader – King Arthur decides to re-establish the tradition of the White Stag at his court.

While my emphasis on the redundancy of these lengthy descriptions of dress and appearance in romance may seem flippant, I actually believe the opposite to be true: indeed, these passages were deeply meaningful to their intended medieval audience – but they also serve a highly significant, if completely opposite, purpose to the modern reader.²⁶ The description of all the features of Enide’s dress would convey a great deal of information to the initiated medieval reader which is now lost to those of us who are not experts on twelfth-century courtly clothing, leaving us only with a sense that the dress signifies outlandish wealth – but no explanation as to why that means we must visualize at such length and detail the creation of her outfit. In other words, the narrator is speaking to an audience that he with confidence can assume understands why this description matters. To a modern reader, in contrast, Enide’s dress serves perhaps best to remind us that we are not the implied, or intended, reader of the text.²⁷ Consequently, the import that the sheer length of the

²⁶ I am aware that there are many interesting and illuminating critical readings of this scene that suggest various ways in which the creation of Enide’s dress were significant to the style and substance of the work as a whole to a medieval audience. In ‘Enide’s See-Through Dress’, for example, Roger Middleton sums up a debate that has been ongoing since the romance revival of the nineteenth century about the possibility that Enide needs a new dress made because her old clothes are so worn that they, in fact, are entirely see-through. This would have important implications not only for the scene I quote, but also for the status of Enide as the pure object of Erec’s love. See Roger Middleton, ‘Enide’s See-Through Dress’ in *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P.J.C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 143-164. My purpose here is to compare the *appearance* of redundancy in medieval romance and in *Romola*, not to suggest that these descriptions are actually of no use to the modern reader – particularly those who are already well-versed in its historical and literary contexts.

²⁷ Throughout this chapter, I refer to “us” as readers, as well as “modern” or “contemporary” readers. Unless stated otherwise, that refers to any reader from the nineteenth century and onwards through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It might seem counterintuitive, when making an argument about the subtleties of historical distance and implied readers, to generalize so broadly about actual readers so far apart in time and

description gives, offers in *itself* a sense of the past, as a tantalising glimpse of the values shared by the people inhabiting that past. A gap opens up that may in fact be more thrilling as a sense of historical difference and distance than any sense of recognition and universality. And that is exactly the readerly experience that *Romola* tries to convey. When the novel takes a whole chapter to show the reader each stage of the illusion-making transforming Florence into a “glorious show”, it is regurgitating the author’s painstaking research of Florentine fifteenth-century customs for sure. But scenes like ‘A Face in the Crowd’ and the Proem also exemplify a pattern of evoking a scene from the past through the sense of mystery and inaccessibility that the distance between ourselves and that past can produce.

But if the task for the actual reader is to resemble, or fulfil the role of, the implied reader, then the romance sets up considerable obstacles, as Beer notes:

“[The romance] is usually acutely fashionable, cast in the exact mould of an age’s sensibility. Although it draws on basic human impulses it often registers with extraordinary refinement the particular forms and vacillations of a period. As a result it is frequently as ephemeral as fashion and, though completely beguiling to its own time, unreadable to later generations.”²⁸

Indeed it is possible, reading Beer alongside Iser, to suggest that a successful romance *depends* on the gap between implied and actual reader never being bridged. Medieval romance is not concerned with evoking the striking differences between the looks of the past and the present in the ways we have come to expect of a nineteenth-century historical novel. But as we saw in *Erec and Enide*, they are nevertheless unfailingly careful to set up their intended audience in highly specific terms – so specific, in fact, that future readers may feel excluded, which is of course what helps produce the pleasurable sense of distance

context, but in a sense this will constitute an important part of my argument about *Romola*; I think that there is a distance between the late-medieval setting of Eliot’s novel and any reader living after the French Revolution that is larger and more difficult to bridge than the distance between ourselves and Victorian readers, who share the mindset that was *introduced* during their lifetime: the nineteenth century saw an explosion of self-awareness of the distance between past and present which brings their mindset much closer to ours than to readers of only a hundred years earlier, let alone four or five hundred years.

²⁸ Beer, 12.

characteristic of the genre. The, because No concessions are made to include us, the modern-day readers, through explanations or a broadening of who the assumed reader is meant to be, and through that lack of explanation we are, paradoxically, given a sense of the medieval reader. Chrétien de Troyes' *The Knight with the Lion* provides a particularly direct example in its opening, asking its audience to "look beyond those who are present among us and speak now of those who were", with the latter referring to King Arthur and his court.²⁹ At first, this may sound like an introduction typical of the sense of universal present-ness associated with romance; "those" who are now part of the past hardly constitutes a specific historical setting. But while romance is not interested in the past as a place that looks and appears noticeably different from the present, it is very specific about the placing of its present audience, as the final paragraph of the text makes clear:

I've not heard any more about [the Knight with the Lion], and you'll never hear anything more unless one adds lies to it. This manuscript was copied by Guiot; his shop is set up permanently before the church of Our Lady of the Valley.³⁰

Though the quick copy shop plug might appear comically jarring to us as a way to round off an Arthurian romance, it also showcases a crucial facet of the genre of romance. Too often, romance is described as ahistorical and dreamlike. But it is a genre that is very conscious of its own audience as that of a specific time and place, so definite in fact that the scribe can confidently advertise his whereabouts to potential repeat customers. Here, we find another example of the consistent sense of sequestration to the world of romance that I suggest Eliot's text tries to recreate.

²⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion* in *Arthurian Romances*, ed. William W. Kibler (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 295.

³⁰ *The Knight with the Lion*, 380. There are conflicting opinions as to the relationship between the scribe called Guiot and de Troyes' original texts, but since his are the oldest versions we have of many of de Troyes' romances, they are often also thought to be the most accurate and faithful. For a fuller account, see William W. Kibler's introduction, particularly 1-10.

It is of course far beyond the scope of my dissertation to make a case for the implied reader being central to the *medieval* genre of romance. However, its function in romance is absolutely crucial to nineteenth-century conceptions of the medieval genre of romance, and consequently I argue that those ideas helped shape Eliot's novel. *Romola* continuously dwells on the gap that opens up between the imagined audience of a romance, and its actual, modern audience. The text plays up the romance's "unreadab[ility] to later generations" by constantly pointing to how differently the fifteenth-century mind would perceive anything the author shows us from what we ourselves would consider to be real, true and possible. This is how the text produces the historical distance that my dissertation argues is crucial to how British nineteenth-century literature imagines the past. But whereas the authors explored in earlier chapters tend to point to historical distance as an obstacle to overcome, Eliot's romance relies on the gap remaining open.

The most striking way the novel produces a sense of that fifteenth-century mindset is through its treatment of optical illusions as markers of veracity rather than deception. The Proem and 'A Face in the Crowd' both set up, in their careful layering of past and present, a complex series of visual displays where characters of the novel can act out different versions of how optical illusions help illuminate that sense of inaccessibility produced by the historical distance of romance. 'The Pyramid of Vanities' tackles the same concept more explicitly, by presenting a bonfire of actual illusions going up in flame. Once Savonarola is in power, he wants to eradicate the illusionary displays we were shown in such detail in 'A Face in the Crowd':

This was the preparation for a new sort of bonfire – the Burning of Vanities [...] the pile of vanities was to be set ablaze to the sound of trumpets, and the ugly old Carnival was to tumble into the flames amid the songs of reforming triumph (419).

The Pyramid is literally built on optical illusions of all kinds – its tiers contain masks, masquerading dresses, false hair, mirrors and “transparent veils intended to provoke inquisitive glances”(419). The interpretation encouraged by Savonarola’s followers, the Piagnoni, is that these illusions need to be stripped away and burnt in order for a more truthful, stripped-down picture of the city to emerge. But at the heart of Savonarola’s hunt for visual truth lies a perilous effort to simplify, which Piero di Cosimo, the painter, spells it out with great bitterness, arguing that destroying the masks and veils is “helping to burn colour out of life” – which must be considered a more severe distortion of reality than the adornment of a hair piece (421). Walking there with eagerness (and greatly sympathetic to Savonarola’s cause), Romola thinks of the bonfire as a “day of sight-seeing”, and as an “epoch in carnival-keeping” and once she arrives she is eager to “take a first survey of the unparalleled sight”(418). The Burning of Vanities is set up to deprive the city of visual spectacle, but has become one of “unparalleled” magnitude itself: “there was to be a scene of so new and striking a sort, that all Florentine eyes must desire to see it” (418). However, the bonfire is not just an impressive spectacle but also has a violent purpose: “Hidden in the interior of the pyramid was a plentiful store of dry fuel and gunpowder, and the ugly old Carnival was to tumble into the flames amid the songs of reforming triumph” (419). Piero’s fear that Savonarola has “burn[ed] the colours out of life” is never justified.

There is a critique inherent in this scene, of what happens when you reject all things beautiful in the name of faith or other kinds of utilitarian zeal which would have been familiar to educated nineteenth-century readers. And in its zeal to show the danger of rejecting surfaces and beauty, the tone is reminiscent of the writings of pre-Raphaelite artists like William Morris. However, whereas in Morris you would expect the text to contrast the splendour of Florentine art with Savonarola’s impoverished aesthetic resulting in ugly, sterile destruction, in Eliot’s text that never happens. Instead, illusions and spectacle prove entirely

resistant to destruction. In his efforts to strip Florence of illusions, Savonarola has created another illusion of a much more serious kind, and the contrast we expect, between faux spectacle and real “truth”, never materialises. Indeed, the failure of the ‘The Pyramid of Vanities’ implies that optical illusions and spectacles function throughout the text to illuminate truths, that the characters discover once they learn how to interpret the visions and spectacles presented to them.

Leighton, as part of the so-called “Sixties” school of English illustration, initially seems a perfect fit to complement Eliot’s “closed world” of romance. Unlike the comical-satirical pictures created by the previous generation like Cruikshank and Thackeray, his style resembles the pre-Raphaelites in its combination of attention to historical detail, and what Hugh Witemeyer calls “precise symbolic meaning”.³¹ That mixture presents in itself an odd opposition of sorts; the stylized presentations of Romola’s body as a series of classical sculptures sit uncomfortably next to his diligent rendition of urban and rural scenes of medieval poverty and disease, as well as the moments of ordinary domesticity involving Tessa, her children and her mother. Leighton’s visual introduction of the protagonist in ‘The Scholar and His Daughter’ is a beautifully composed study of lights and shadows as they fall across the perfectly contrasting figures of Romola and Bardo; the daughter’s upright body offers a sweepingly open gesture reversed in her father’s hunched introversion (Figure 1). The “precise symbolic meaning” of youth vs. age, naivety vs. suspicion, that Witemeyer points to comes across with perfect clarity. But Eliot was ambivalent about Leighton’s work; our records of their correspondence show the author’s expectations of the artist to be at times almost unbearably specific:

I think your sketch [‘The Blind Scholar and His Daughter’] is charming, considered in itself. [...] I should have wished Bardo’s head to be raised with the chin thrust forward a little – the usual attitude of the blind head, I think – and turned a little

³¹ Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 157.

towards Romola, ‘as if he were looking at her.’ [...] Her face and hair, though deliciously beautiful, are not just the thing – how could they be? Do not make yourself uneasy if alteration is impossible, but I meant the hair to fall forward from behind the ears over the neck, and the dress to be without ornament.³²

This oft-quoted letter does not show Eliot at her finest as a collaborator, but I also think there is more to her admonitions than an antiquarian fussiness about detail. Although Leighton captures the tone of Eliot’s scene beautifully, Witemeyer also points out that “the illustrator has reversed nearly every important visual association with the heroine” in what he calls “the author’s introductory word-portrait.”³³ In the text she wears a “black fillet” above her ears that form a “veil” for her neck and, as Eliot points out, the narrative describes Bardo “as if he were looking at her” while she reads out loud (48). In Leighton’s picture, in contrast, we see two figures that make interesting contrasts for the viewer but who do not interact in any way. ‘The Blind Scholar and His Daughter’ illustrates a very particular interpretation of what Romola looks like, and in his visual introduction to the character, her iconoclastic beauty is conveyed at the expense of the relationship to her father.

It is inevitable, perhaps, that an illustrator must choose one aspect to highlight over another, and so we could dismiss the discrepancies of ‘The Blind Scholar and His Daughter’ as a departure from the norm. But when we consider Leighton’s further illustrations, in particular his depictions of Tessa in relation to Romola, it becomes clear that his images throughout the novel continue a very specific interpretative direction for the heroine, of increased isolation and (forced) independence in relation to her family, city and even time period. He offers his own visual version of a very particular illusion that is, on the one hand, just one of many quaint local historical customs that Eliot insists on including, but on the other hand, provides a vital point of plot and motivation for several characters. At the

³² *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol.4, 40.

³³ Witemeyer, 167.

Peasant's Fair, a street conjuror performs a marriage ceremony between Tito and his innocent lover Tessa, which she believes to be a real union. Legally, it is not of course, but the illusion of what has symbolically taken place at the Peasants' Fair becomes merged and indistinguishable from reality as Tessa's narrative progresses. Mark W. Turner has shown that the domestic happiness portrayed in Leighton's illustrations of Tessa at home with Tito and, later, their children, are always either preceded or followed by a drawing of Romola. The structure of the visual narrative draws attention to how the illusion of Tessa's marriage illuminates the legal, but hollow marriage that is Romola's lot. It also hints at an inverted mirror relationship between Romola and Tessa. The most comfortably domestic image of all the illustrations is of 'Tessa at Home', asleep and rocking Ninna's cradle (see Figure 2). Here, we here share Romola's gaze onto a scene of peaceful domesticity, contradicting the actual status of Tessa, hidden even to herself to the end, as a fallen woman, a Magdalene. We are even shown Tessa's bed in the background, where presumably her "husband" Tito frequently comes to stay.³⁴

Thus, an illusion can draw light on what George Eliot could not express directly in words – that the innocence and purity of Tessa remains unsullied though she lives in sin. The whole truth of her married life can only be discovered by looking through the illusion of a conjuror's "trick" at the market. And in the Epilogue, we discover that Tessa has not only been allowed to survive into content old age (unlike most "fallen women" of Victorian literature), but has never been informed of her true marital status. Against the reader's expectations, Tessa will die believing herself to be a respectable widow of a good man, and will never have to give up this particular illusion.

³⁴ Mark W. Turner, 'Drawing Domestic Decline: Leighton's Version of *Romola*' in Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettlejohn, eds., *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 180-183.

Optical illusions, as a concept of vision, takes as starting point an intimate connection between the seen and the invisible. And in Florence, the “Unseen Powers were mighty,” recalls the Florentine spirit of the Proem (5). But though the ensuing text will prove him right in some ways, a devout faith is also placed by the Florentines in what can be seen, particularly in external appearances and the act of spectatorship as means of illumination. In the first chapter of the novel’s third volume, Tito’s betrayed father Baldassarre is found half-dead with hunger and madness in a doorway. “It’s likely he’s alive enough if he could only look it” suggests an onlooker (372). The speaker is expressing a belief in the power of visual appearance: if Baldassarre could only be encouraged to *look* alive, his health could be restored. An intimate connection between the invisible and visible, inner truth and its external visual representation, is here assumed by the Florentines. Eliot makes constant use of the connection, notably in this first real meeting between Romola and her father-in-law. When Baldassarre opens his eyes, he terrifies Romola who has only just recognised him: “Baldassarre was looking at *her* for the first time” (373). Baldassarre’s appearance “[was] like an unmistakable signature to a remembered handwriting.” Romola has only seen his features once before, portrayed in a painting, but “[t]he light of two summers had not made that image any fainter in Romola’s memory”. Twice removed from actual experience – translated from an unknown face into painted image, subsequently translated to the inner image she has stored in her memory – his face still fills Romola with “tremor and palpitation” (373). Baldassarre’s direct gaze, his eyes seeking hers, provides proof that the relation between them is significant and will somehow change both their lives.

Savonarola is constantly, as recognised by Piero di Cosimo, associated with a dearth of colour that is notable in the vision of Florence as gaudy, glittering and reminiscent of a rainbow in its display of various tints of life. Savonarola and his followers exist in stark contrasts of shadow and the light of prophecy, which take over the show of colours that the

previous rule of Florence favoured. Romola, disguised on the road leaving Florence, encounters Savonarola and his coming is prefigured by the narrator as a play of shadows with light:

The light is perhaps never felt more strongly as a divine presence stirring all those inarticulate sensibilities which are our deepest life, than in these moments when it instantaneously awakens the shadows (329).

His effect on her is powerful; she can look at “nothing but the brightness on the path and at her own shadow, tall and shrouded like a dead spectre” (329). Savonarola’s convinces her to go back to Florence and fulfil her duties as wife and citizen. This, he explains, must be “so that your fairness and all natural gifts may be but as a lamp through which the divine light shines the more purely”(364). Romola obeys, but the monotony of her existence appears to her as “a white ghost at the windows,” in a striking parallel to how Savonarola himself is often described (See Figure 3) (365).

In an essay on nineteenth-century photography’s memory of colour, Lindsay Smith reminds us that the Victorians did not read the monochromy of photography as the “natural” or “stripped down” picture as we nowadays consider it to be. Rather, “they registered the absence of colour as a shortfall on the part of a medium otherwise miraculous in its verisimilitude”³⁵. Smith reads photography, through its lack of colour, as a medium that appears to offer illumination, nakedness, scientific exactness and secular revelation, but what it does in fact show is a surface that is an illusion. Similarly, Savonarola’s prominent absence of colour filled with an abundance of sharp outlines of light and shadow. As such a figure, he functions in the latter half of the novel as a form of ultimate test for Romola herself, in how to read an illusion. We can consider the scene where Romola reads Savonarola’s enforced “confession” as one such instance, in this case presenting the problem of seeing in “black and

³⁵ Lindsay Smith, ‘Thinking Blues: The Memory of Colour in Nineteenth-Century Photography’ in Roger Luckhurst and Josephine McDonagh, eds., *Transactions and Encounters: Science and Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 56.

white” what Romola knows to be false. Or, rather, what she ultimately deems to be half-true, half-false:

Looking at the printed confessions, she saw many sentences which bore the stamp of bungling fabrication: they had that emphasis and repetition in self-accusation which none but very low hypocrites use to their fellow-men. But the fact that these sentences were in striking opposition, not only to the character of Savonarola, but also to the general tone of the confessions, strengthened the impression that the rest of the text represented in the main what had really fallen from his lips (572).

Neil Hertz suggests that this passage is one of the clearest examples of Romola serving as a surrogate of her author, reflecting Eliot’s laborious trawling through Florentine archives to read documents just as the Confession; Eliot shows how she “embed[s] the practices of reconstructive historical scholarship within her narrative.”³⁶ Indeed, the text goes on to quote passages directly from the Confession itself, interspersed with passages of free indirect speech that interweaves the narrator’s reflections on Savonarola with Romola’s own. As David Carroll notes, in this scene “[e]verone is engaged in the difficult act of interpretation.”³⁷ The language throughout the chapter emphasises the double-ness of Savonarola’s character and impact on his time: Romola sees the “blending” of motives that she recognises from Tito, and she reads his words as “describ[ing] a doubleness that was conscious and deliberate”; she considers his life as “tumultuously mixed” and his confessions centres on the admission of “duplicity” (573, 564). Later, she will hear that even upon the day of the completion of his trial, he performs a contradictory “two-fold retractation” of his testimony (576). Written historical records in this novel, as many critics have observed, are shown to be as double-edged as Savonarola’s confession; they provide essential factual detail, but can also be frustratingly contradictory and difficult to interpret. But Savonarola’s “double agony” of half-lies and ambivalent admissions is also very much marked as what the

³⁶ Neil Hertz, *George Eliot’s Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 149.

³⁷ David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xi.

textual archive is in its dumbest, most blunt form: black signs on white. And Savonarola remains lost in monochrome until the end; his truth-seeking mission to strip away life's colours ultimately only affects his own self, resultin in a stark binary of light and shadow, black and white. 'The Confession' ends miserably with the yearning for lost truth reflected in a quote from the historical text of Savonarola's own speech:

[...] the agony of sinking from the vision of glorious achievement into that deep shadow where he could only say, 'I count as nothing: darkness encompasses me: yet the light I saw was the true light (574).

Savonarola, even at the end, remains an illusion of veracity whose tell-tale sign is an absence rather than a mark. Removing the illusions and replacing them with "simpler" images in black and white does not ultimately lead to any fuller revelations, it only leads to more spectacle, and to much more misleading illusions that purport to offer "truth" dressed up in black and white. Seeing and interpreting Savonarola's black and white truth as incomplete brings Romola to her arguably greatest moment; when she herself fulfils the role of an illusion to the villagers in 'Romola's Waking.'

'Romola's Waking' and Nineteenth-Century Romance: Historical Distance in the Making

As I discussed earlier, Eliot herself saw the project as a romance from early on, and continued doing so whilst also complaining that "I have written now about 60 pages of my romance. Will it ever be finished? – ever be worth anything?"³⁸ Not long after, G. H. Lewes wrote with anxiety to Eliot's publisher Blackwood during the year of his partner's laborious research: "When you see her, mind your care is to discountenance the idea of a Romance being the product of an Encyclopaedia."³⁹ It is clear from Eliot and Lewes' letters and diaries that the

³⁸ *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 109-110.

³⁹ Quoted in *The Journals*, 91.

author considered her work a romance from the first time the idea of the novel was mentioned. But what, exactly, would it have meant in the mid 1800s to distinguish your novel from your earlier works by naming it a romance?

Walter Scott explicitly named several of his historical novels as romances, without there being anything supernatural or even particularly gothic about their plots.⁴⁰ In the Preface to *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), Nathanael Hawthorne proposed that his novel was a romance in the sense that it was an “attempt to connect a by-gone time with the very present that is flitting away from us.” Hawthorne, whom George Eliot read and admired, is also clear on the historical distance needed to create a romance: “from an epoch now gray in the distance, down into our own broad daylight”.⁴¹ What my introductory discussion of Masson’s emphasis on the romance’s descriptions of the past (contrasting with the “novelistic” rather than “realist” properties of accounts of modern life) shows, is that those few critics or authors who attempted a rigorous distinction between novels and romances tended to emphasize the sense of the past viewed at a distance as one of the most significant characteristics of the genre. This is an aspect of romance which we now seem to either take for granted to an extent that it goes unmentioned, or is left entirely forgotten. I think need to recover the connection to a past distant from the reader’s present as a crucial element of the genre in our scholarship, and to analyze it with rigor.⁴²

⁴⁰ For a comprehensive discussion of the romance elements in Scott’s work as a whole, see Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott and Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Fiona Robertson, “Romance and the Romantic Novel: Sir Walter Scott” in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. Corinne Saunders (London: Blackwell, 2004), 287-304.

⁴¹ Nathanael Hawthorne, *The Centenary Edition of The Works of Nathanael Hawthorne, Vol. 2: The House of Seven Gables*, ed. William Charvet (Michigan: Ohio State University Press, 1967), 2. Eliot’s diary shows that she had read, and liked, *The House of Seven Gables* when beginning work on *Romola*; it further shows she read *The Marble Faun* during its completion. Dorothea Barrett’s introduction to the Penguin edition of *Romola* suggests that the third volume of *Romola* is directly influenced, in tone, by Hawthorne’s romances (xv).

⁴² Here, I want to note Ian Duncan’s interesting idea, underpinning *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel*, that the novel built its cultural and academic prestige throughout the first half of the nineteenth century on a return to romance in terms of its plotting and style. His definition of nineteenth-century romance is an equivalent, of sorts, of plotting: “Fiction in these novels is the effect above all of plot, conspicuous as a grammar of formal conventions, that is, a shared cultural order distinct from material and historical

Our contemporary discussions of the relationship of the British nineteenth-century historical novel's relationship to romance tend to produce extremely contradictory results. As I discussed in relation to David Masson's book from 1859, it seems to me that this is because our definitions of nineteenth-century romance tend to be based on a rather anachronistic comparison to literary realism, posing them as a Victorian binary. Halfway through the nineteenth century, the term "realism" was only in occasional use. Ruskin refers to realism throughout *Modern Painters* (though only about visual art). G.H. Lewes published an essay in 1858 on 'Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction'. It is nevertheless important to note that romance wasn't necessarily thought of as realism's "other" in the way that modern criticism, dealing with realism as an established genre of nineteenth-century fiction, tend to describe the two. But in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, Francis O'Gorman nevertheless explains the romance as defined by its opposition to realism:

Realism is a discourse of the senses; romance of the sensational. Realism belongs with satire: a mode of writing rooted in experience. Realism persistently feels the drag of tragedy: it is an expression of the painfulness of being alive. Romance belongs with epic, the gothic, and, for all its terrors, with the comic – the unlikely resolution of human problems through non-human agents, in accord with wish fulfillment.⁴³

O'Gorman's contrast between romance and realism is effective, and useful as an indicator of how we classify Victorian literature in modern scholarship. But I suggest that it exemplifies a definition of nineteenth-century romance that risks neglecting another: due to its over-

contingency" (2). While Dickens' "romance plots" in particular provide rich material for his readings, I think that Duncan's omission of the nineteenth-century's investment in *the past* as an integral part of the genre of romance to be curious if unsurprising, considering that his introduction explicitly states his definition of romance to build on the "rhetorical definition of romance by *modern* theorists" such as Northrop Frye and Fredric Jameson (my italics). But I also see a parallel between his idea of a "shared cultural order" and the "insider" qualities of the implied reader that I consider essential to the structure of romance. However, his analysis, in my view, doesn't go far enough; though there is definitely a sense of a "shared order" at the heart of romance, I think it is crucial to note that the actual reader can never be part of that order – or the work would no longer read as a romance.

⁴³ Francis O'Gorman, 'Realism and romance' in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, ed. Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 485. It is worth pointing out that although he begins with these opposing, ironclad categories of romance vs. realism, O'Gorman does ultimately present a nuanced case that allows for a great deal of variety within both genres throughout the nineteenth century.

emphasis of the opposition to realism, it has lost sight of the aspect that I will show was a crucial part of the genre to nineteenth-century authors and critics: its connection to a past that is viewed from afar. Because modern criticism tends to emphasize terms like fantasy, “wish fulfilment” and even implausibility, it is natural to assume that romance is opposed to history, if we take that term to denote accounts of the past that tries to uncover the true facts of what happened in the past. A historical novel, to be credible in its evocation of the past, must thus be a work of realism. But if the sense of the past is dropped out of our account of nineteenth-century romance – or if romance is dropped out of our discussion of the nineteenth-century historical novel – then we lose not only an important aspect of the origin story of the historical novel, but we also risk reading nineteenth-century historical romances in an ahistorical vacuum.

‘Romola’s Waking’ provides a striking example of the process by which we, as modern readers, are set up to try to bridge the historical distance between the text’s fifteenth century setting and ourselves, only to be repeatedly denied. The passage also offers us a different way to discuss the binary of romance and what we would call “realism” in terms less anachronistic to nineteenth-century literature. After Romola’s discovery of her husband Tito’s deceit, and the collapse of Savonarola’s religious *coup d’état* of Florence, the heroine finds herself stranded in all senses of the word, drifting shipwrecked, then wandering in to a village that has been nearly emptied out by the plague:

Romola certainly presented a sight which, at that moment and in that place, could hardly have been seen without some pausing and palpitation. With her gaze fixed intently on the distant slope, the long lines of her thick grey garment giving a gliding character to her rapid walk, her hair rolling backward and illuminated on the left side by the sun-rays, the little olive baby on her right arm now looking out with jet-black eyes, she might well startle that youth of fifteen, accustomed to swing the censer in the presence of a Madonna less fair and marvellous than this(554).

‘Romola’s Waking’ is a Victorian version of what Beer calls “the casual interplay between history and miracle” that characterizes the medieval romance. Like ‘A Face in the Crowd’, the chapter sets up a visual set-piece; the “particular forms and vacillations of the period” that Beer point to are found in the extraordinary level of visual detail, for example how Romola’s face is lit from the *left* side, whereas she is carrying the olive-colored child on her *right*; it is as if a stained-glass church window has come to life, gliding in to the villagers’ midst to save them. However, because this is not a medieval romance, but a nineteenth-century version of romance absorbed into a George Eliot novel, there is nothing casual about the interplay between history and miracle. Instead, we are offered two visions, two interpretive possibilities, squeezed into one: you could say that Eliot is trying to write two texts at once. The first is a medieval romance, using the term in its narrow pre-Romantic definition, of a Christian miracle: the Blessed Lady’s appearance in the village. To the villagers, and simultaneously to the reader, Romola appears as an icon of fifteenth-century female sainthood. We are even given a glimpse of her after-life as a local legend; the narrative halts for a moment to point out the distance from which we must view the legend retold here, because many generations have passed since:

Many legends were afterwards told in that valley about the Blessed Lady who came over the sea, but they were legends by which all who heard might know that in times gone by a woman had done beautiful loving deeds there, rescuing those who were ready to perish(559).

The “sight” of her appearance has been transformed by eye-witnesses from historical act into legend, thereby opening up the gap between the past and present on which the romance of the story hinges.⁴⁴ Because this happened “in times gone by”, we must now understand the

⁴⁴ The distance that immediately opens up between the reader and the events just described here is similar to the conventional introductory paragraphs of medieval romances that are careful to convey to readers the distance from which they recount their tales, as in the opening of *The Knight of the Lion* discussed above.

events that took place in the village in terms of a romance plot: the passage is carefully constructed to produce a sense, in the reader's mind, of an outsider looking in.

In terms of the implied reader, the immediately biggest difference between Eliot's text and a medieval work of romance is of course that Eliot's implied reader is a construct of *nineteenth-century* ideas of the mindset of a medieval romance audience. The distance between the implied and modern-day readers of *Romola* is an artificial, laboriously created gap, produced by the author rather than by the centuries of distance stretching between the creation of the work and its modern audience. This also explains, I think, some of the heavy-handedness felt in Eliot's description of her heroine as a church icon. But there is also another, second version of the text in play: a historical fiction about a fifteenth-century woman who is brave, but also psychologically devastated enough to risk her life by walking into a plague-ridden village:

She was beginning to feel herself faint from heat, hunger and thirst, and as she reached a double turning, she paused to consider whether she would not wait near the cow, which some one was likely to come and milk soon, rather than toil up to the church before she had taken any rest. Raising her eyes to measure the steep distance, she saw peeping between the boughs, not more than five yards off, a broad round face, watching her attentively, and lower down the black skirt of a priest's garment and a hand grasping a bucket (555).

Though the narrative predominantly observes Romola as the "Visible Madonna" that she appears to the villagers, there are also a few moments like this, when the readers see beyond that, into Romola's mind. Even though she suffered with great emotional and spiritual intensity in just the previous chapter where she featured, her thoughts now turn out to revolve around the physical sensations of her predicament, and what she *sees* rather than what she feels. The church is not a spiritual home, but just a building she must "toil" and sweat to reach. The Holy Father of the village is first glimpsed rather unimpressively in small, close-up parts; first a "broad round face", then his black skirt and a hand "grasping a bucket" as if

he is indeed on his way to milk the cow. The scene is vibrant with the descriptive details we would expect from a historical novel with aspirations that we would now think of as “realist”. But unlike in *Adam Bede* or *Middlemarch*, the physical details of Romola’s experience are not layered with an account of her psychological state – instead, we simply “see” what the heroine sees. And in contrast to the “sight of awe” that her outward appearance presents, that view is focused entirely on the practicalities of survival and care. The decision to deflect the reader from Romola’s state of mind to her visual experience is the more extraordinary considering she tried, only in the previous scene, to commit suicide out of despair with her marriage and the spiritual life of her city.⁴⁵ Only one scene later, we find Romola to be resourceful, determined and far from devastated.⁴⁶

If we find that the scene presents a confusion of generic elements, one way out of that critical impasse is to redefine the genre that we believe *Romola* belongs to, and subsume the contradictory evidence of the presence of the “other” genres within ‘Romola’s Waking’ as well as the novel as a whole. In her book-length study of *Romola*, Felicia Bonaparte argues that the text is in fact an artefact of the nineteenth-century revival of the epic, an outgrowth of the nineteenth-century “historical impulse” converging with a turn to myth and symbolism;

⁴⁵ Though our rationales for why this is the case differ, here I build on Nicholas Dames’ observation that Romola, in the village scenes, seems strangely suspended between past and future; she appears to be incurious, and devoid of any form of reflection, about the past: “What Romola *was* was outlined by her father and filled in by Tito and Savonarola – was, that is, an inevitable outcome of the often passive experiences she had undergone in the past; what Romola *will be* is now a free space, open to definition because the claims of the past have been suspended. In its broadest terms nostalgia is a leave-taking of the past’s resonances; this is what Romola arrives to find” (232). In line with his larger argument about how memory and history seem to diverge (and at times compete) in the nineteenth-century historical novel, Dames recognizes Romola’s surprising shift into resourceful practicality as a form of “renewal in present utility” and also sees in the style of the section a “safety in the past’s vague summary” (231). I read the section differently, as I see the details of Romola’s appearance to be loaded with a certain kind of historical specificity that I connect back to the mass of historical details, presented visually, in the rest of the novel. See Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ In the initial serialization of *Romola*, the June instalment ended with the chapter ‘Drifting Away’ which also contains Leighton’s illustration of her suicide attempt: this is where the reader last saw the heroine, setting off in a boat down the river as she was contemplating ending her life. Readers had to wait two months (rather than the usual one), until August, to find out what happened to her. Eliot is an author who handles narrative tension of this kind very well and this makes the decision to not give us a sense of Romola’s emotional state of being in the follow-up scene stand out even more.

“the romance of a secular and skeptical age”.⁴⁷ Bonaparte does not view history and romance as significantly connected when she argues that the novel “is not a romance, in the loose sense, which merely happens to have a particular historical setting.”⁴⁸ Bonaparte considers the subject of history to be the key to the novel’s genre, but she nevertheless follows our modern separation of historical narrative and romance by suggesting that epic can incorporate the realist elements of historical novels, alongside the timeless, symbolic parts that belong with romance. In ‘Romola’s Waking’, she argues, Eliot offers a “dream of a medieval allegory” where “time is perceived in the context of eternity.”⁴⁹ Directly opposed to Bonaparte’s emphasis on myth is Caroline Levine’s ingenious reading of the novel as a thoroughly realist work “in the mould of [Ruskin’s] *Modern Painters*.”⁵⁰ She traces, throughout the novel, a pattern of “temporal gap[s]” between “deceptive appearances and the tested truths of later understanding.” She proposes an expansion of the term realism, using Ruskinian empiricism as a model of testing representation against reality, ultimately with the purpose of attaining a more perfect knowledge, or truth. Effectively, she incorporates those elements that may designate *Romola* a romance – the moments of prophecy, vision and dream states – into a larger definition of nineteenth-century realism.⁵¹ She reads Romola’s appearance in the village as an instance of realized religious prophecy that helps the reader to “[test the] interpretative paradigms against the hidden realities of the world.”⁵² While I find Levine’s account more convincing than Bonaparte’s, it nevertheless suffers from a

⁴⁷ Bonaparte, 15.

⁴⁸ Felicia Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot’s Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 14.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵⁰ Caroline Levine, ‘The Prophetic Fallacy: Realism, Foreshadowing and Narrative Knowledge in *Romola*’ in *From Author to Text: Re-reading George Eliot’s Romola*, eds. Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 136.

⁵¹ It should be noted that Levine’s argument is more complicated than I make out here: for one thing she is careful to show how the narrative structure of *Romola* reaches the limits of such a Ruskinian definition of realism, precisely because the temporal gap she identifies is constantly foreshortened by interruptions of visions and prophecy, which renders the empiricist process of learning and discovery through experience decidedly suspect.

⁵² Levine, ‘The Prophetic Fallacy’, 159.

comparable problem: both critics essentially expand their preferred genres, of epic and realism respectively, to fit with the properties of the novel they otherwise can't justify.

I think it is a mistake to dismiss the past as an almost incidental aspect of romance – in fact, I think the nineteenth-century definition of romance goes hand in hand with historical subject matter; as this chapter suggests, the novel's relationship to the chasm that opens up between the past and the present is not only a crucial aspect of what makes the text a historical novel, but it is also what makes that novel a romance. Romance, as Gillian Beer's definition shows, is a genre entirely wedded to the historical specificity of the past in which it is set, the "particular forms and vacillations of [a certain] period". In other words, when viewed from the present, romance gives an extremely detailed and accurate sense of the period in which it was created, because it is a genre that addresses itself entirely to the audience of its *own* present moment. I think 'Romola's Waking' shows that many of *Romola's* puzzling "failures" can be reevaluated when considered as an example of nineteenth-century appropriations of romance.

Consequently, rather than understanding Eliot to vacillate between two versions of her plot, where one is a romance that tells of the birth of a legend, and the other gives us a woman struggling to survive the day, I want to suggest another way of resolve the tension between romance and "the real" in this scene: I suggest that historical distance provides the way in through which we can access what happens to Romola in the village. In *Erec and Enide*, the details of Enide's new dress are significant to the implied reader of the story, but probably not to any reader picking up the text some centuries later. *The Knight of the Lion* is reproduced in modern editions with its incongruous advert for a twelfth-century copy shop intact, because it gives the modern reader a glimpse of the contemporary scribe as well as audience of the medieval romance. In 'Romola's Waking', Romola is carefully described to resemble a religious painting of a kind particular to her period, but which may not be

immediately recognizable to a reader of Eliot's own time. The light falling from the left, and the darkness of the child's skin in her arms, are details that are meaningful to a viewer familiar with local village church paintings from the latter half of the fifteenth century, but much less evocative (and perhaps even distracting) to a modern audience. The teenager who is used to praying in his village church to "a Madonna less fair and marvellous than this" sees a miraculous vision and Romola's contemporaries experience a "sight none of them could forget." The narrator thus places us and our modern interpretation again firmly on the outside, even in the moments when we see what happens from inside Romola's mind. The heroine inspires courage, saves the village, and even follows the script of medieval Christian romance to the extent that she turns a Jewish child into a Christian. It is in these terms she is remembered by the villagers, and they are never given a reason to think otherwise. As modern readers, has no other recourse; we can only catch a glimpse of Romola's relationship to the villagers from a distance – which is the entire point: her appearance as the Madonna is an illusion from a religious perspective, but – as the narrator sternly reminds us in the chapter's closing – that illusion is also a way to understand, from our vantage point, what being in that village in the fifteenth century would really have been like.

Later in the scene, the priest and the boy begin to suspect she is not a supernatural form, "but their minds were filled instead with the more effective sense that she was a human being whom God had sent over the sea to command them (558)." While a modern reader may wish for the illusion to be dispelled rather than replaced by another – for the villagers to understand Romola as a human, albeit very impressive and brave, woman fleeing from a crisis, rather than someone sent by God to take "command" – the narrative does not allow for that. In a sense, the novel is asking us, as readers, to participate in Romola's story in a very similar way to the villagers – which can be very frustrating at times, as when we are shut out of Romola's thoughts at the greatest emotional and psychological crisis of her life. But the

villagers take the illusion of who she is and make it the truth, rather than another disguise. It is as if Eliot sets up the distance between the text and the modern reader as a challenge: “the fifteenth-century audience would understand how to read this perfectly – so can you?” The focus on historically specific details, as in the meticulous description of Romola’s appearance to the villagers, is produced *by*, rather than in tension with, the elements of romance.

Prefacing the scene of Romola’s appearance as the Blessed Madonna in the village, Frederic Leighton shows her in a boat travelling down the water towards the village (See Figure 4, ‘Drifting Away’). Mark W. Turner notes that the subject of Leighton’s picture would be familiar to nineteenth-century viewers, as it closely resembles Victorian representations of fallen women “who were most often depicted drowning”:

The twist in Romola’s fate is that her suicide attempt is not brought on by her own sexual promiscuity, but that of her faithless husband; unusually, the sexual sins of the husband have led to the disintegration of the family unit.⁵³

Turner reads the break with the conventional moral story in Leighton’s image as a sign of figures of middle-class domestic unhappiness to come, women like the protagonists of Kate Chopin’s ‘The Awakening’ and Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* who are entrapped and driven to end their lives though they have not themselves “fallen”, but are instead the subjects of others’ failings. But rather than reading the scene with a view to the literature ahead, I want to point backwards in literary and historical time, to also show how Leighton’s drawing helps draw attention to the misleading expectations of his and Eliot’s contemporary audience. Shawn Malley finds the image to be “evocative of the epic, soul-searching female voyages of the Lady of Shalott and Elaine” as well as of the Holy Mother figure.⁵⁴ The most memorable image from the written scene – and perhaps the mental image that Turner and Malley are

⁵³ Mark W. Turner, ‘George Eliot v. Frederic Leighton: Whose Text Is It Anyway?’ in *From Author to Text*, 26.

⁵⁴ Shawn Malley, “‘The Listening Look’: Visual and Verbal Metaphor in Frederic Leighton’s Illustrations to George Eliot’s *Romola*”, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, Vol. 19 (1996), 273.

actually describing – is from the chapter’s ending, when Romola is indeed drifting, as their accounts seem to fit with the way the chapter ends:

And so she lay, with the soft night air breathing on her while she glided on the waters and watched the deepening quiet of the sky. She was alone now: she had freed herself from all claims, she had freed herself even from that burden of choice which presses with heavier and heavier weight when claims have loosed their guiding hold. [...] Romola felt orphaned in those wide spaces of sea and sky. She read no message of love for her in that far-off symbolic writing of the heavens, and with a great sob she wished that she might be gliding into death.

She drew the cowl over her head again and covered her face, choosing darkness rather than the light of the stars, which seemed to her like the hard light of eyes that looked at her without seeing her. Presently she felt that she was in the grave, but not resting there: she was touching the hands of the beloved dead beside her, and trying to wake them (504).

It is an illustrator’s gift of a picture: a woman drifting away across the wide expanse of “sea and sky”, lying down in a boat with her hair spread around her head like an Elaine drifting into death for the love of a man, or a Rachel Vinrace fleeing from a man’s oppressive power. Perhaps he could have even drawn the faint outlines of the “beloved dead” as ghosts hovering around the heroine’s resting body. However, when we look at the way the illustration is composed, it seems that his drawing much more closely illustrates the preceding section of the text. Though Leighton’s image clearly conveys Romola’s unhappiness through the set of her mouth, it is difficult to see the resemblance with either Woolf’s Rachel Vinrace or the unfortunate women of Arthurian myth:

In this sea there was no tide that would help to carry her away if she waited for its ebb; but Romola thought the breeze from the land was rising a little. She got into the boat, unfurled the sail, and fastened it as she had learned in that first brief lesson [a fisherman has shown her how to navigate the ropes and the sail before selling her the boat earlier that evening]. She saw that it caught the light breeze, and this was all she cared for. Then she loosed the boat from its moorings, and tried to urge it with an oar, till she was far out from the land, till the sea was dark even to the west, and the stars were disclosing themselves like a palpitating life over the wide heavens (503).

Rather than the passive woman waiting to drown of the chapter’s final paragraphs, here we have the Romola of the plague-stricken village who sweats, is hungry and thirsty, but still

“toils” ahead to find survivors. And the active and capable – as well as spiritually adrift – hero is a figure deeply familiar from medieval romance.⁵⁵ Leighton’s choice of illustration helps to cast Romola in the role of knight adventurer in the mould of Lancelot or Gawain (who both experience long journeys down waterways, in moments of great spiritual crisis, when they are searching for the Holy Grail). In his picture, her hands are on the rope that controls the sail, and though her face is turned up toward the sky, it is very possible to imagine her positioned that way to keep an eye out for that “light breeze” that she needs in order to steer, rather than just gazing up in surrender at her fate. And Leighton portrays the heroine in daylight, thus avoiding the striking contrast the small human figure of Romola would make against the dark expanse of a starry sky. Instead, Romola’s body takes up the entirety of the foreground of the picture, looking large and capable as she pulls the rope, thus reducing the sense of threat and helplessness that the rocky cliffs and water behind her would otherwise convey.

In ‘Romola’s Waking’ we must resist reading the heroine through the background story of loss and psychological stress that would indelibly shape the narrative had it been “just” a historical novel. Here, we must resist interpreting her figure as a nineteenth-century audience would, as either a “fallen woman” or a passive victim of men’s cruelty. Just like in ‘Romola’s Waking’ those interpretations are not exactly untrue, but they shut off the possibilities signaled by Leighton’s decisive steerswoman. This chapter does not aim to rescue Eliot’s novel as an immediately pleasurable reading experience, but rather I want to suggest ways in which understanding the novel’s relationship to historical distance makes

⁵⁵ It is beyond the scope of my argument here, but I think Leighton’s visual choices, read alongside Eliot’s text, offer many exciting possibilities for the exploration of unconventional models of gender throughout the novel. Romola’s “can do” attitude and her extreme capability to cope in situations of extreme stress, are some of the features of her character that I think are most undervalued, and least discussed, by critics. Similarly, as I will go on to discuss, Leighton’s illustrations highlight the unusual treatment of Tessa’s character; as a typical “fallen woman” we might expect her to share Hetty Sorrel’s fate, but the reader’s expectations of morals as well as gender are again confounded.

possible another form of readerly satisfaction, by better understanding the elements of romance that provide some of the novel's most baffling moments. It is no coincidence, I think, that the two features that set *Romola* most apart from George Eliot's *oeuvre* are the setting in a more distant past, and the intense emphasis on visual appearances – particularly when we consider the specially commissioned illustrations. I read those two aspects as two expressions of the novel's difference in genre from Eliot's other novels. Reading *Romola* helps us see that the specifics of the sense of the past in nineteenth-century romance are much more vital to the genre of historical fiction, as well as to the generic interplay in historical fiction, than just as an interchangeable historical setting or background. The text encourages us to try to imagine our way into the mindset of a late-medieval audience – though through that very act of imagining we become conscious of our outsider status as modern readers. When Romola appears to the villagers as the Visible Madonna, the image presents the world of romance as a realm that is alive, vibrant and “real”, as long as we resist placing Romola in a context of our modern visual associations. ‘Drifting Away’ thus echoes the attitude to the visual codes of medieval romance that we find more explicitly conveyed in Romola's subsequent scenes in the village, and as modern viewers we must again accept finding ourselves viewing the images from across a vast distance consisting of our own modern assumptions.

Chapter Four

Ghost Histories: Vernon Lee and the Art of the Past

Introduction: Vernon Lee at the Crossroads of History and Art History

Mid-Victorian authors like Charles Dickens, George Eliot and the pre-Raphaelites imagined the past with a confidence attributable at least in part to their sense that literary writers and historians were involved in similar projects of imagining the past – and as my dissertation shows, novels, historiography, poetry and romance throughout the nineteenth century did indeed share the inclination to, as Mark Adams puts it, “experiment with, to manipulate the distance between audience and text.”⁵⁶ They employed a particular strategy for doing so; I argue that historians and literary authors alike evoked the past through an emphasis on the reader’s visual imagination. But their successors in the 1880s and 90s seemed to shy away from the implicit competition between historians and writers that had, most notably, so incensed and incentivised Macaulay and Carlyle to lure readers away from Walter Scott. This was due in large part to the increasing professionalization, and scientization, of the discipline of history. To some degree, British historiography had been playing catch-up with the rest of Europe in this regard. The Young Hegelians helped to revolutionize history-writing on the Continent during the 1860s, and two decades later, Britain began to follow; Michael Bentley cites the foundation of the *English Historical Review* in 1886 as “an important staging post in the transformation of professional attitude” for their British counterparts.⁵⁷ But the eventual outcome was the same as in Britain as in Germany and

⁵⁶ Matthew Adams, ‘A View of the Past: History, Painting and the Manipulation of Distance’, *Literature & History*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2002), 20-21. Here, Adams is summarizing Mark Salber Phillips’ important work on the nature of historical distance throughout the literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, although neither Adams nor Phillips makes the case – as my own thesis does – for *multiple* genres of historical writings (including literary genres of poetry and novels) in nineteenth-century Britain.

⁵⁷ Michael Bentley, ‘Introduction: Approaches to Modernity: Western Historiography Since the Enlightenment’ in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley (London: Routledge, 2006), 448. See also T.W. Heyck,

France: by the end of the nineteenth century, history-writing was no longer concerned with making its readers imagine and immerse themselves in the past, and in its contrasting appearances to the present. And literary authors no longer claimed with the same degree of confidence to be authoritative custodians of the past. In schematic terms, you could say that the goal of history-writing itself was undergoing a transformation from “resurrection” to a more straight-forward – but also more stringent – quest for historical knowledge.⁵⁸ Literature and history-writing, gradually parting ways throughout the century, were now almost entirely divorced.

To what extent this shift from literary to academic, or professionalised, historiography influenced literature’s own relationship to the past remains up for debate.⁵⁹ But I would suggest that once history-writing stopped emphasising the past in such visual terms, fiction writers sought new models, beyond both literary historiography and the historical novel, to incorporate the past into their imaginative worlds. One such model was the increasingly professionalised discipline of art history. In British nineteenth-century art criticism, writers like Augustus Pugin had helped “pioneer the idea that building was a statement of value, reflecting the ethic of the builders.”⁶⁰ John Ruskin took that idea and developed it into an entire philosophy of art, history and sociality; his moral correlation of a certain period’s art and its perceived values and beliefs enjoyed equal holds over the developing disciplines of

The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 120-154.

⁵⁸ Romantic French historiographer Jules Michelet used the term “resurrection” about his history-writing. For Michelet’s influence on British nineteenth-century historiography, see Michael Bentley, ‘Introduction: Approaches to Modernity: Western Historiography Since the Enlightenment’ in *Companion to Historiography*, 411-416.

⁵⁹ See for example Horst Steinmetz, ‘History in Fiction – History as Fiction: On the Relations between History and Literature in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’ in *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*, eds. Theo D’haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995). Steinmetz suggests that one historiography entered the Academy, “literature took upon itself functions and tasks that historiography rejected as irrelevant” (82).

⁶⁰ Carl Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 76.

Art History and History throughout the century.⁶¹ But mid to late European nineteenth-century practitioners like Karl Lamprecht and Aby Warburg began to question Ruskin's worship of medieval art by considering the "prosaic" and "conventional" aspects of the Gothic. They viewed its art as a series of commercial endeavours that were bound up in the inflexible socioeconomic structure of the thirteenth and fourteenth century rather than produced in a Ruskinian spirit of craftsmanship and collaboration.⁶² Interest in the economic conditions of the past lead to the anthropological study of folklore and "popular" art, which in turn came to influence newly diverse interpretations of the properties of Renaissance art:

Renaissance art, which to earlier historians of culture had appeared to be timeless and detached from the world, could now be interpreted as an accomplishment that was essentially dynamic, the product of a difficult struggle [between popular and high art forms] ... without in any way impugning its quality.⁶³

In comparison to this mode of divorcing the purpose and aesthetic effects of the art work, Ruskin's meditations on the nature of the medieval mindset conveyed to us through the era's art works would have seemed quaint and dated; an artefact of the earlier decades of the nineteenth-century rather than of the "true" Middle Ages. This chapter investigates a writer whose work in many ways gives literary life to her contemporaries' rejection of Ruskin's organic view of the past: Vernon Lee, who I argue occupies a crucial intersectional point in this context. She was an art historian also producing fiction and literary essays, whilst caught up (though not necessarily wholly immersed) in aestheticism. Lee never held an academic position as an art historian and, due to prejudices to her gender and controversial politics, her authority amongst her peers was always tenuous. After the Great War her work slipped into

⁶¹ One good recent survey of the impact of Ruskin's writings on a wide array of Victorian cultural spheres is Keith Hanley and Brian Maidment, eds., *Persistent Ruskin: Studies in Influence, Assimilation and Effect* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

⁶² Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 383.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 388.

gradual obscurity.⁶⁴ But to readers of late-Victorian literature and culture, I believe her work is hugely significant, not least because she presented the first serious challenge to the waning monolith of John Ruskin's influence on the relationship between visual art and the past – a challenge which, I will show, also has important consequences for the ways in which literature treats the past and historical subjects. She was participating in the formation of art history that, as a discipline, sought to model itself on the increasingly scientized discourse of history, but she also incorporated strands of experimental formal analysis taken directly from the discourses of essay-writing and literary descriptive writing into her contributions to the art historical discourse of the 1880s and 90s.

The frequently cited reference to her in Robert Browning's late poem 'Inapprehensiveness' (1889) shows us that, to writers and readers of the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Lee's contribution to discourses of art appreciation and its relationship to the past was seen not only as significant, but as a direct interruption of the dominant cultural narrative represented by Ruskin. The poem's speaker stands next to the woman he loves (but to whom he is unable to declare his feelings) admiring the sunset over an old ruined castle. The woman speculates on what the scene would have looked like before it went to ruin:

– sight perhaps deceives,
Or I could almost fancy that I see
A branch-wave plain – belike some wind-sown tree

⁶⁴ See Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 292-309, for an eloquent summary of the reasons Lee's post-WWI fall into obscurity was so far and fast. The biggest problem was undoubtedly Lee's staunch pacifism which was ill-suited, to say the least, to the mood of the 1910s and 20s. But Colby shows that Lee's enthusiastic merging of disciplinary discourses – literature, psychology, physiology as well as sociology and politics – was also beginning to look, by the 1920s, like a relic of the Victorian era's "gentleman amateur" model of academic inquiry. The editors of the most recent scholarly edition of Lee's *Hauntings* point out that Burdett Gardner's literary biography of Lee (1954, 1987), which for most of the twentieth century remained the only full-length book on her life and work, did a lot of damage that presumably delayed her critical revival: "Denied the opportunity of writing Lee's biography using her personal papers, Gardner's thesis looks at Lee's "lesbian imagination" from a Freudian perspective [...] to create a picture of a fascinating, cold, mannish woman and destructive lesbian "monster" (21). See Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, 'Introduction' in Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (1890), (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2006), 9-27. All further references will be given in brackets in the text.

generalizing about the relationship between morals, historical events and schools of art.⁶⁷ To late nineteenth-century writers and readers invested in visual art's relationship to literature and to the past, Vernon Lee was (briefly) a name to evoke as representative of equally meticulous learning to Ruskin, but also as representative of a more sceptical attitude toward our ability to evoke the past through its art works.

By rejecting Ruskin's holistic view of the past, Lee also exemplifies the growing detachment between the increasingly formalized disciplines of history and art history on the one hand, and literature on the other: her stories display a constant resistance to the assumption found in a great deal of Victorian historical writings that the art of the past can tell us everything we need to know about its culture and values. In the final two decades of the nineteenth century, I suggest, literary depictions of the visual appearances of the past were no longer focused on conveying the thrill of historical distance with the goal of immersing the reader more fully in the world of the past. Instead, visual markers of the past were more commonly featured as fragments, or isolated objects, within texts that imagine their relationship to the present. Though my chapter focuses exclusively on the work of Vernon Lee, it should be noted that I see Lee as participating in a mode of relating to the past that she shares with many other authors and texts around the same time, and so I will set out some of these discourses as a brief contextual background for my close-reading of Lee's short fiction. I argue that for the writers who are interested in evoking the art of the past, historical distance remains as important as it was to the early and mid-Victorians – but the ultimate purpose has shifted: rather than seeking to bring the reader into the past, these texts select visually arresting moments and pieces of art and place them in the contrasting environment of the present, with greatly varying effects. Michael Field's collection of lyrics *Sight and Song*

⁶⁷ Vernon Lee, 'The Book and Its Title: To One Of Readers – the First and Earliest' in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1881), 7. All further references will be given in brackets in the text.

(1892) makes use of Walter Pater's impressionistic art historical method and, as Stefano Evangelista shows, both women hiding under the pseudonym "were keen to emphasise the theatricality of Victorian Hellenism."⁶⁸ In other words, they evoke the visual art works of the past in a conscious effort to re-shape them to their poetic purposes in the present. Other examples include many of Henry James' short stories and novellas, most notably 'The Last of the Valerii' (1874), Thomas Hardy's short story 'Barbara of the House of Grebe' (1881) as well as his novel *Jude the Obscure* (1895), which I return to below. One interesting, if extreme, example is William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890). A utopian romance of the future, the novel dwells on the use of art objects to relate the present to both past and future. The narrative takes pains to show how the artistry of the utopian future has incorporated aspects of the idealized medieval past, but also – importantly – has made the art its own. Unlike Morris' earlier work (and in particular his poetry that I discuss in my second chapter), that seeks to connect the reader to the past and its perceived collective mindset, *News from Nowhere* takes down the art works of the past from its pedestal of worship and puts it to malleable use in both the present and the future.

More broadly, we can see this development reflected not only in the much-diminished popular and critical stature of the historical novel, but also in how the interest in the past changes in poetry and drama. I suggest that it is in this spirit of reassessment and rejection of earlier literary and disciplinary practices within that Lee's short stories should be understood. I show how Lee's fiction disputes Ruskin's absolute moral correlation between the art object and the period in which it was produced: I argue that her supernatural fiction and essays on art instead shows historical art objects to change their moral value depending on how they are viewed and treated in the *present*. The result is a fictional mode that uses the supernatural to

⁶⁸ Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 124.

historicize the present with a view to the future rather than the past. Here, I am placing Lee in a late-Victorian discourse of “fears of the future” that extends beyond the previously mentioned circle of art connoisseurs and observers; I am referring to a late-Victorian idea that the present day may seem irrelevant or wrong-headed when viewed in the long perspective of deep or evolutionary time.⁶⁹ In Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, the heroine worries that “[w]hen people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what will they say!”⁷⁰ The despair at the gendered brutality of their own time is shared by Olive Schreiner’s protagonist Lyndall, who speculates that ““if I might but be one of those born in the future; then, perhaps, to be born a woman will not be to be born branded.”⁷¹

These two texts also reflect another aspect of the late-Victorian fear of the future that I will argue is related: that the moral and aesthetic values we believe we can see in the past are historically relative, and therefore – potentially – meaningless. Jude notes with characteristic Hardy-esque bitterness that “[e]ven some of those antiques might have been called prose when they were new. They had done nothing but wait, and had become poetical. How easy to the smallest building; how impossible to most men.”⁷² The art of the past seems valuable now only because of its age, rather than because of any inherent moral or aesthetic properties. The only thing worse than not finding an audience until after your death, is to

⁶⁹ This idea is well established in criticism of the late Victorian period. See John Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels: An Entangled Bank* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2013) for a recent example of a book-length study on the subject that discusses Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* from this perspective. Even though I am discussing this idea as typical of the late Victorian period, I should also note here that I think Thomas Carlyle (as usual out of step with his own time) reflects a version of this anxiety in his writings about the past; in his review essay of Walter Scott’s *Waverley* novels, he asks the reader to “[c]onsider, brethren, shall we not too one day be antiques, and grow to have as quaint a costume as the rest?”

⁷⁰ Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), ed. Patricia Ingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 226.

⁷¹ Olive Schreiner, *The Story of An African Farm* (1883), ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1993), 171.

⁷² *Jude the Obscure*, 97.

undeservedly find an audience after your death, simply because of the passing of time.⁷³ The passing of time thus risks reducing the present to insignificance, by acting simply like a killing machine, as for Schreiner's young Waldo:

He saw before him a long stream of people, a great dark multitude, that moved in one direction: then they came to the dark edge of the world, and went over. He saw them passing on before him, and there was nothing that could stop them. He thought of how that stream had rolled on through all the long ages of the past – how the old Greeks and Romans had gone over; the countless millions of China and India, they were going over now. Since he had come to bed, how many had gone?⁷⁴

Waldo's panic at "seeing" the mass deaths of the past takes the late-Victorian fear of the passing of time to its extreme, which probably is due to inhabiting the perspective of a child on the edge of night terrors. But nevertheless the passage shares with the others an urgency about the need to stop the passing of time – whether on a historical or larger, evolutionary timescale – from disintegrating into meaningless cycles of creation, death and re-creation. Lee's response, I suggest, is to try to make the present more meaningful, which is what I suggest her stories work out through a frame of haunting and the supernatural. In the 'Postscript, or Apology' to her essays, Lee worries:

...I foresee that many a time in the future there will arise between me and the fresco or picture at which I am looking ...something ill-defined, pleasurable, painful – which will make me read only with my eyes; which will make me (worst humiliation) lose the thread of my theories, of my thoughts, of my sentence (285).

Whether on the scale of one or many people's lives, Lee shares her contemporaries' concern with the judgement of tomorrow. Like Hardy's Sue and Schreiner's Lyndall, Lee's protagonist in 'Amour Dure' points out that "[w]e smile at what we choose to call the

⁷³ Dehn Gilmore points out that although there has been a lot of helpful analysis of the scientific, or evolutionary, concerns about the future in Hardy's work, "his central imaginative move [...] is to envision a future artistic movement, in which the art of the present will have ceded way and a new aesthetic ideal will have risen" [...] the late-century's ever-present question of "who shall inherit the earth?" has not only a Darwinian but also an art-historical valence" (122). See Dehn Gilmore, *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art: Fictional Form on Display* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷⁴ *The Story of An African Farm*, 21.

superstition of the past, forgetting that all our vaunted science of to-day may seem just another superstition to the men of the future” (71). The present, to Lee’s characters as well as to Lee as an art critic, always threatens to be just another step in the temporal sequence of a future observer’s past, reflecting the 1890s fear that the present era will be viewed by future historians as insignificant, not only compared to the future, but to the great achievements of the past. At times, she stands out from contemporaries like Hardy and Schreiner not only because of her more explicit focus on the art of the past, but in her cautious optimism about the possibility of making an impact on the future. In ‘Poetic Dialogue’, she suggests that in her own time of secularization and loosening of social mores, the arts can take up the space left vacant by earlier belief systems and “do both much more harm and much more good than it could do before” (271). Her protagonists try to connect to the past through its art works, which is a strategy that has worked earlier in the century. But faced with the late-Victorian fears about the judgement of the future on the present, it is no longer enough to grasp what the past is about; instead Lee’s characters must figure out how to use the art of the past to improve the chances of our own time’s impact on the future. Statues come alive, portraits speak and living women embody ancient art works as a result of obsession in the face of disaster – because in the world of Lee’s tales we *must* bridge the gap between past and present if the present is ever to have an impact on the future.

Finally, a few words about my analysis of Lee’s relationship to aestheticism. In some ways, the fears I outlined above is just another version of a story already familiar to us through aestheticism: writers like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, who, regardless of their differing social, moral and literary starting points, have in common the anxiety that they are living in an insignificant and even trivial age – and that the future holds no foreseeable improvement unless artists of the present can learn to equal the greatness of the past. The fear is thus two-fold: firstly, that the artistic achievements of humanity have “peaked” already in

the past and that we are only living in the aftermath, and secondly that the future will agree, by considering our era insignificant. But I suggest that Lee's short stories offer a different side of the aesthete's interest in decline. My chapter aims to show that for Lee – and unlike for Pater or Wilde – the aesthetic impact of the past on the present is a morally urgent issue.⁷⁵ At first, this may appear to counter Lee's own work: unlike Ruskin, who found a rather unqualified correlation between, for example, Gothic art and the moral values of its creators and time period, Lee presents the moral value of the art of the past as evasive and difficult to define. In her essay 'Ruskinism', she argues that it is the historical relativity of art (rather than any absence of moral value) which we must comprehend and use if we are to truly appreciate art:

Art, if it lives, must grow, and if it grows it must grow old and die. And this fact gradually, though instinctively, is beginning to be felt by all thinkers on art, Ruskin, with his theory of moral aesthetics, could never recognize (217).

As we see in 'Ruskinism', there is certainly a case to be made for Lee as an aesthete, in the sense that she rejects what she calls Ruskin's Victorian "moral aesthetics". As Christa Zorn puts it, even though Lee was "emotionally closer to Ruskin's ethical demands [than that of her aesthete peers Pater and Wilde], she disparaged him like an older self she felt she had left behind."⁷⁶ But it is also vital, I think, to consider Lee's *entire* thesis on the matter, as she finishes 'Ruskinism' by making a crucial distinction: "though art has no moral meaning, it has a moral value" (229). I propose that Lee – like Ruskin – indeed finds moral values central to evaluating the aesthetic artefacts of the past. But rather than seeking to uncover the moral

⁷⁵ I will be the first to admit that, due to the constraints of space and topical focus, I am only offering a highly schematic version of late-Victorian aestheticism, as an "amoral" movement famously committed to "art for art's sake". For example Walter Pater, whom Lee intermittently admired and criticized and who always remained an important interlocutor for her art criticism, was of course a much more complex thinker on the relationship between morality, history and art than my few references allow, though I also think he was absolutely a proponent of "art for art's sake"; for a thorough and sensitive analysis of his aestheticism, see Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁷⁶ Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History and the Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), xviii.

meaning of the art of the past, her stories are interested in uncovering art's moral *value* in the present – a highly relative use depending entirely on the present audience. Lee's stories suggest that the moral value of the art of the past shifts depending on where and when the present observer finds him- or herself. I am thereby agreeing with a majority of scholars that find Lee's works to be resisting Ruskin's influence even when she is reaping the rewards of his historical discoveries – but I am going against the grain of current criticism on Lee's fiction that consider her stories to reject moral and ethical evaluations of art outright.⁷⁷

Hilary Fraser talks of Lee's art historical writings as “framed by a consciousness of visuality that is distinctively modern in its skeptical questioning of referential fidelity and in its ironic awareness of simulation.”⁷⁸ In this way, her work reflects a tension between, on the one hand, the established nineteenth-century tradition of calling on the reader's visual imagination to evoke historical distance as an immense gap for the writer and reader to cross together – and, on the other hand, the impulse to blot out historical distance altogether in order that the visual art itself can stand out from the narrative, as objects worthy of ahistorical aesthetic contemplation. I argue that something similar is true of her fiction; her constant “questioning” of the possibility of accessing historical truth through art puts her at odds with the pre-Raphaelite movement and its later incarnation in the loose late-Victorian group we refer to as aestheticism. But as Kristin Mahoney points out, it is also true that Lee is similar to

⁷⁷ See for example Carolyn Burdett, ‘Is Empathy the End of Sentimentality?’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (August 2011), 259-274. Burdett credits Lee's “encounters with aestheticism” with causing her to transform her early admiration for Ruskin into “rejection of the moral suppositions associated with Ruskin's work” (261). In *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History and the Female Intellectual*, Zorn offers a more nuanced account of Lee's relationship with aestheticism and its supposed rejection of morality in art. Her preface points out that since Lee “has been remembered mainly through her links with aestheticism, few critics are aware that she also contributed significantly to cultural, psychological, and social criticism, and to historical scholarship” (xvi). She later argues that Lee “reclaims from aestheticism its value as a socially and politically responsible discourse” (79). Susan Lanzoni offers a fascinating counter-argument of sorts, by suggesting that Lee implicitly resisted aestheticism's divorce of morals from art through her development of an “empirically based theory of art” in a series of informal but rigorous experiments with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, “recording changes in respiration, balance, emotion, and body movements in response to aesthetic form” (330). See Susan Lanzoni, ‘Practicing Psychology in the Art Gallery: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics of Empathy’, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Fall 2009), 330-354.

⁷⁸ Hilary Fraser, ‘Women and the Ends of Art History: Vision and Corporeality in Nineteenth-Century Art Discourse’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Autumn 1998/1999), 90.

William Morris in that she seeks to combine the “moral commitment evident in Ruskinian and socialist thought” with “the significance of pleasure” to aesthetic as well as moral experience.⁷⁹ In her collection of short stories *Hauntings* (1890), I show how Lee uses the supernatural to evoke a connection with the past that indeed tries to have it both ways; historical distance is emphasised (rather than blurred) through the supernatural collision of past and present in the form of ghosts returning, art objects coming to life and even whole buildings housing people from several time periods simultaneously. And the constant threat of things going wrong, of the danger of connecting the past with the present, shows the question of historical distance to be very much at the forefront of the narrator’s mind: what would be the consequences of making the art of the past come alive in the present? By employing supernatural tropes of haunting, possession and myth, the art of the past does indeed come alive – but often at a terrible cost. The result for the protagonist is often some form of immense loss, whether it be the death of a beloved, or of their sanity or even of their own life.

‘Faustus and Helena’

In her essay ‘Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art’, Vernon Lee suggests that while the supernatural and art may seem aligned, they are in fact fundamentally opposed: “the supernatural is essentially vague, while art is necessarily distinct: give shape to the vague and it ceases to exist.”⁸⁰ This idea of vagueness vs. the distinct has been interpreted by a majority of modern critics as, on the whole, a pre-Freudian version of Freud’s opposition between the conscious and unconscious mind. Lee provides a rich source of psycho-sexual

⁷⁹ Kristin Mahoney, ‘Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption’, *Criticism*, Vol. 48, No.1 (Winter 2006), 63, n21.

⁸⁰ Vernon Lee, ‘Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art’ in *Cornhill Magazine*, Vol. 43 (July-Dec 1880), 214. The piece was re-published with only minor amendments the following year in her essay collection entitled *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, but I am using the original version from the *Cornhill* here. All further references will be given in brackets in the text.

analysis because of her biography that seems – at least to modern critics – dominated by her difficult relationships to sexuality and repressed (same-sex) desire. Patricia Pulham equates her work’s interest in “dissolution of boundaries” between past and present with that between “self and Other,” and regards her use of myth as “the literary expression of inadmissible desires.”⁸¹ Rachel Jackson is convinced that in Lee’s work, the supernatural in all its forms “is always a metonym of the desire which underlies the contingent processes of language and subjectivity, and through its repetitive and death-inscribed nature, desire is, in turn, rendered spectral.”⁸²

There is no denying that Lee’s experiences of confusion about her own gender identity – as well as her constant experience of gender discrimination in her dealings with male colleagues and critics –left their mark on her essays and fiction. But I would like to suggest here that the “supernatural” as a concept theorized in ‘Faustus and Helena’ and re-told through her short fiction a decade later is also very much a product of Lee’s acute sensitivity to the changing late-Victorian sense of the past. The visual imagination was no longer the exciting means by which to imagine our way into the past, but a way to perceive the shifting moral values of historical scenes when considered from different temporal vantage points. As an example, I will consider the contrast Lee offers between the supernatural and art in her reading of the legend of Faustus and his summoning of Helen of Troy. Unlike Marlowe and Goethe’s versions, which imaginative power “owe everything to artistic treatment”, the myth of Faustus and Helena works directly on our imagination, without the medium of the art work (212):

...we cease to see the Elizabethan and the pseudo-antique Helen; we lift our imagination from the book and see the medieval street at Wittenberg, the gabled

⁸¹ Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), xviii and xix.

⁸² Rachel Jackson, ‘The Haunted Space of Desire: The Meta-Textual in Vernon Lee’s ‘Amour Dure’ in *Space, Haunting, Discourse*, eds. Maria Holmgren Troy and Elisabeth Wennö (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 94.

house of Faustus, all sculptured with quaint devices and grotesque forms of apes and cherubs and flowers; we penetrate the low brown rooms filled with musty books and mysterious ovens and retorts, redolent with strange scents of alchemy, to that innermost secret chamber, where the old wizard hides, in the depths of his medieval house, the immortal woman, the god-born, the fatal, the beloved of Theseus and Paris and Achilles; we are blinded by this sunshine of antiquity pent up in the oaken-panelled chamber, such as Dürer might have etched [Here follows another list of details of the imagined appearances of medieval town life.] And gazing thus into the fantastic intellectual mist which has risen up between us and the book we were reading, be it Marlowe or Goethe, we cease after a while to see Faustus or Helena, we perceive only a chaotic fluctuation of incongruous shapes: scholars in furred robes and caps pulled over their ears, burghers' wives with high sugar-loaf coif and slashed bodices, with hands demurely folded over their prayer-books, and knights in armour and immense plumes, and haggling Jews and tonsured monks, descended out of the panels of Wohlgemüth and the engravings of Dürer, mingling with, changing into, processions of naked athletes on foaming short-haired horses, of draped Athenian maidens, carrying baskets and sickles, and priests bearing oil-jars and torches, all melting into each other, indistinct, confused like the images in a dream; vague crowds, phantoms following in the wake of the spectre woman of antiquity, beautiful, unimpassioned, ever young, luring to Hell the wizard of the Middle Ages. Why does this all vanish as soon as we once more fix our eyes upon the book?
(213-214)

This extraordinary passage – a stream-of-consciousness meditation on the looks of urban culture worthy of a time-travelling Mrs Dalloway, a self-conscious display of antiquarian knowledge about both medieval and ancient Greek art and customs, as well as an attempt at empirically reporting the way the mind's eye imagines the intersecting moments of the past – is worth quoting at length, because here we find the impetus behind much of Lee's fictions published in the following decade: There is an important difference between the easily definable – if masterly – “Elizabethan” art of Marlowe and “pseudo-antique” Goethe, and the supernatural imagination, which produces powerful but “confused” dream images and visions of timeless “ever young” “phantoms”. If we “lift our imagination from the book” we can see further than either Marlowe or Goethe intended.

But what does Lee encourage us to imagine exactly? How is “the supernatural”, as a stand-alone concept, envisioned as being different from artistic renditions of the characters and the story? Her argument rests on the contrast between the “distinct” art of literature and

the “vague” power of the supernatural imagination. But the reason I have quoted the text at such length above is to show that Lee’s dream visions are, on the whole, scrupulously detailed and – more surprisingly – remarkably meticulous about getting the historical details right. Even though the supernatural legend of Faustus and Helena draws its power from its sense of “timeless” beauty and terror, Lee’s imagination nevertheless offers us an exquisitely detailed contrast between the visual appearances of medieval and ancient city life. Like the Florentine Spirit guiding us through the opening of George Eliot’s *Romola*, Lee gives us a tableau that thrills because of the supernatural impossibility of medieval and ancient worlds co-existing.⁸³ And what is remarkable is that, on closer look, we discover that the haunting power of that tableau depends on Lee first giving us a very clear and precise account of the differences between the two time periods. As Kristin Mahoney shows about Lee’s art criticism, “[a]ttending to the historical otherness of an object, acknowledging its separateness and sovereignty, endows the object in question with an awe-inspiring distance and difference.”⁸⁴ Lee’s definition of the supernatural is thus not about turning the figures into blurred or invisible shapes, but to allow their highly historicised bodies to co-exist in the same picture. In Lee’s idea of the supernatural, temporality is contiguous rather than suspended altogether.

Even the very moment that Lee describes as the transition from art work to legend – from art to the supernatural – the writer’s imagination is taken up with the visually evocative

⁸³ The parallel between this scene and the layering of different historical versions of Florence in the opening of *Romola* is striking. But although the method is similar, of bringing to the reader’s mind two time periods simultaneously, and letting them sit in relief to one another as a myriorama or some other form of visual pieces of a puzzle slotting together, I think the parallel is not worth pursuing any further than that; the effects of Eliot’s hybrid of realism and romance in *Romola* differ entirely from Lee’s interest in the supernatural as a means of bringing pieces of the past to life in the present. Here, I really think differences of style trumps similarities of theme. A closer antecedent to Lee’s sense of the past would be Eliot’s Gothic novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859) which describes, in the first person, a mysterious ability to look into almost any person’s past. Eliot’s protagonist Latimer and the disastrous mistakes he makes as a result of his visions, shows that it is not nearly enough to “see” the past in the world of this story. To succeed, you must also know how to utilize these visions in the context of your own present.

⁸⁴ Kristin Mahoney, ‘Haunted Collections’, 46.

appearance of the two pasts that collide; she suggests that all she sees once she allows her eyes to leave the page of the book is “a chaotic fluctuation of incongruous shapes”, but when she goes on to describe that vision further it is extraordinarily specific, continuing what Catherine Anne Wiley calls Lee’s “unending barrage of visual detail”: the medieval world of Faustus with its “burghers’ wives with high sugar-loaf coif and slashed bodices, with hands demurely folded over their prayer-books, and knights in armour and immense plumes, and haggling Jews and tonsured monks”, that is “mingling with, changing into” the ancient Greek “processions of naked athletes on foaming short-haired horses, of draped Athenian maidens, carrying baskets and sickles, and priests bearing oil-jars and torches”.⁸⁵ The two visions then merge and become “indistinct” – but the question remains: why are Lee’s supernatural imaginings so faithful to the actual looks of the past? Wiley has written about what she convincingly identifies as Lee’s “unbridled writing”:

[...] the excesses in Lee’s prose – the endless examples, images, details, breathless additions and supplements to every thought – frequently seem to drown or consume the ideas she ostensibly wants to express. It is as if, in order to make the reader understand what she means and see what she sees, she must articulate every *conceivable* possibility and veritably assault the reader with her own vision.⁸⁶

Wiley connects the run-on sentences and “breathless” visuality to Lee’s use of supernatural and ghostly evocations of the past as a kind of repressed exploration of female sexuality, and in particular of female orgasm. On the level of imagery, there are moments of ‘Faustus and Helena’ that certainly seem to provide materials for a sexually weighted reading; the “naked athletes” of Athens are followed by Helen herself, the “ever young” seductress whose sexual allure is strong enough to drive an old man to make a bargain with the devil. But even if we view the overly long and complicated sentences, and the sense of “barrage” or overload of

⁸⁵ Catherine Anne Wiley, ‘The Ethos of the Body in Vernon Lee’s Aesthetics’ in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 70.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

visual sensations that she conveys, as signs of sexual charge, it is still difficult to explain the lack of restraint in evoking the “scholars in furred robes and caps pulled over their ears, burghers’ wives with high sugar-loaf coif and slashed bodices, with hands demurely folded over their prayer-books, and knights in armour and immense plumes, and haggling Jews and tonsured monks” through reasons of erotic ecstasy, at least in any direct form.

Wiley’s eye for Lee’s “endless examples” is astute, but I suggest that ‘Faustus and Helena’ shows us that to understand the texture and rhythm of Lee’s texts we must look to a broader sense of history, as a storehouse of experiences of art and of the supernatural, rather than as a metaphor, or allegory, for the self and more particularly the hidden, sexual self. Though Wiley discusses Lee’s historical essays ‘The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists’ and ‘The Lake of Charlemagne’ at length, she leaves out a remarkable aspect of Lee’s excessively visual prose: her texts erupt, suddenly and violently, in the moments when she imagines herself in contact with the past and the art of the past directly. The moment in the essay when Lee’s imagination moves from “art” to “supernatural” does not really have the effect she claims at the outset, making the picture fade or loses specificity: instead, when the two time periods, and their art represented by “the panels of Wohlgemüth and the engravings of Dürer”, are evoked with sufficient reality and credible detail, the present observer can imagine them both as “mingling” and co-existing – and that, I suggest, is the basis of the thrill of supernatural experience in Lee’s texts. In her story ‘A Wicked Voice’, where a young composer is terrorized by the ghost of the eighteenth-century singer Zaffirino, the protagonist describes his experience of being haunted: “the only thing which remains distinct before my eyes [is] the portrait of Zaffirino [that] keeps appearing and disappearing as the print wavers about in the draught that makes the candles smoke and gutter” (162). The supernatural thrills the reader, in this story, as we are shown distinct shapes that appear and disappear – and this is a very different sort of readerly experience from what Lee’s essay initially proscribes,

which would be more like dwelling in the midst of some sort of constitutional vagueness. As the portrait painter in ‘Oke of Okehurst’ asserts, the supernatural is “vivid but unreal” (107). Lee thus follows writers like Scott, Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris in utilising the thrill of historical distance between the present and the (visual art of the) past. But unlike her early and mid Victorian predecessors, her texts do not seek to bring the reader back into the past – that is indeed the great surprise twist of ‘Faustus and Helena’. Instead, they situate the art of the past within a present context as a great moral experiment, to test its purposes and effects on the contemporary reader, and by extension on contemporary life and culture.

Christa Zorn argues that “Lee’s supernatural, which stages our intuitive and subjective connections with the past, thus can be seen as a metaphor for an unrealized historical method” – a method that tries to move beyond the narrow remit of “objective and detached historiography” by exploring the less systematic sides of history “embodied by the intuitive language of art”.⁸⁷ I think this is right, up to a point: as a writer deeply invested in exploring the past, Lee recognizes there are limitations and possibilities inherent in the almost-complete separation of historiography and literature that defines her own contemporary moment. Thus, to visually imagine the past with the kind of vivid confidence and certainty of her Victorian predecessors actually now requires a moment of supernatural conjuring. However, as I will show in my reading of ‘Amour Dure’, I think Lee’s sense of the past is much more complicated than an opposition between “detached” (bad) scientific historiography and an “intuitive” (good) method based in a sympathetic connection with the art works of the past. In her fiction, I show how the art objects of the past – which are essentially without any inherent moral *meaning* in and of itself – are not used to immerse the reader into the scene of the past, but are brought into the present, for moral *purposes*, to affect, provoke and change the present.

⁸⁷ Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 147.

‘Amour Dure’

‘Amour Dure’ questions how the moral value of the art works of the past travels into the present by addressing the issue head-on: the plot describes what happens when a renaissance painting of a mysterious and morally ambiguous woman appears to actually come alive. The protagonist, Polish scholar Spiridion Trepka, keeps a fragmentary diary. Rachel Jackson reads Lee’s choice of textual vehicle as a way to signal to the reader the uncertainty with which we should treat the narrative that unfolds: “The diary-form [...] is a fundamentally meta-textual form, as the narrative of the diary is inherently other to the external text which bears its title.”⁸⁸ However, the opposite could also be said to be true: framing the uncertainty produced by the genre of the fantastic in a diary allows the story to be placed firmly in the author’s present: the events take place between August 20th and December 24th of 1885. That present-ness, as we shall see, is crucial to the sense of dislocating historical distance experienced by the protagonist. Spiridion Trepka arrives in Italy to work on a volume of art history. He soon becomes interested in the local legend of Medea de Carpi, a sixteenth-century woman who was thought to be responsible for the deaths of five lovers before being murdered herself in 1582. The diary entries give the reader glimpses of Spiridion’s mental journey: from moral abhorrence of Medea de Carpi’s life, through defence of her actions, to maddened love for her, and ultimately to his complicated desire to possess her and even to become her. Throughout the story, Trepka comes across various visual representations of Medea – a miniature and a bust, as well as a portrait that appears to come alive – but he also believes he keeps assignations with her in the local church and on the streets of Urbania. Finally, on Christmas Eve, Spiridion agrees to break into the crypt of Duke Robert II of Urbania and hack his silver effigy into a thousand pieces. The story ends back in Spiridion’s

⁸⁸ Rachel Jackson, ‘The Haunted Space of Desire: The Meta-Textual in Vernon Lee’s ‘Amour Dure’’, 95.

room, where his last diary entry records Medea's steps on the staircase. A postscript adds that the following morning Spiridion's body is "discovered dead of a stab in the region of the heart, given by an unknown hand" (76).

Because it is a first-person narration, and the only "evidence" we have of Medea's ghostly visits is the increasingly erratic testimony of Spiridion, it appears that a central question of the story must be whether Spiridion is really haunted or mad – and whether Medea is really evil or, as Spiridion insists until his death, she has only been portrayed as evil by the men who wanted to destroy her. The first issue could be considered solved by the postscript, where the account of his stabbing offers a "proof" of sorts to the reader that Spiridion is really haunted rather than insane. But as many critics have pointed out, Lee's text also fits Todorov's definition of the fantastic's characteristic "moments of hesitation" in that the supernatural makes the reader hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation.⁸⁹ There is an "element of indeterminacy" that gives a "sense of irresolution" to each supernatural encounter.⁹⁰ And even though the story is probably best enjoyed as a ghost story rather than as an account of descent into madness, there is also a case to be made for Spiridion's "haunting" by Medea to be a result of his historical disappointment with Italy.

The first diary entry reads:

Urbana, August 20th, 1885. – I had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the Past; and was this Italy, was this the Past? I could have cried, yes cried, for disappointment when I first wandered about Rome, with an invitation to dine at the German Embassy in my pocket, and three or four Berlin and Munich Vandals at my heels, telling me where the best beer and sauerkraut could be had, and what the last article by Grimm or Mommsen was about (41).

Poor Spiridion is crushed to find that rather than coming "face to face with the Past", he is pursued by prosaic Germans who eat mundane food and quote recent art-historical

⁸⁹ Tsvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, transl. Richard Howard (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 44.

⁹⁰ Stefano Evangelista, 'Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism', *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, 106.

scholarship at him. Amongst the ironically termed “Berlin and Munich vandals,” there is no immersion in the past to be had anywhere. He is a scholar of both art and history himself, but prefers to not acknowledge his kinship with the authors of “all those other atrocious books of erudition and art criticism” who crowd the streets in search of their next project (41).

However, in his opening cry of disappointment at the lack of historical authenticity in his surroundings we already begin to suspect that Spiridion is not himself the most acute interpreter of the past; Spiridion wants “Italy” and “the Past” to be a unified, easily readable experience, something to be immersed in that will make him forget himself. However, the national unit of “Italy” is not a term applicable to the Renaissance he longs to recognise around him. No wonder, then, that he is immediately drawn instead to myth, in this case the powerful tale of Medea de Carpi, whose Colchean namesake resonates throughout the tale.

About halfway through his experience of being willingly haunted, his diary entry reads:

In my walks, my mornings in the Archives, my solitary evenings, I catch myself thinking over the woman. Am I turning novelist instead of historian? And it still seems to me that I understand her so well; so much better than my facts warrant. First, we must put aside all pedantic ideas of modern right or wrong. Right and wrong in a century of violence and treachery does not exist, least of all for creatures like Medea. Go preach right and wrong to a tigress, my dear sir! Yet is there in the world anything nobler than the huge creature, steel when she springs, velvet when she treads, as she stretches her supple body, or smooths her beautiful skin, or fastens her strong claws into her victim? (55-56)

Peter G. Christensen argues that Spiridion here reveals himself to be “in the class of men whose views of women seem to be little more than fantasies about female narcissism.”⁹¹ But I suggest that by comparing Medea to a “tigress” and dissecting the power and beauty of each part of her separately, he also shows himself to be an aesthete of the highest order; his enthusiasm is expressed in formalistic or even mechanistic terms: she is “steel” and “velvet” and her nobility is that of an animal, a “creature”. As Angela Leighton comments on Lee’s

⁹¹ Peter G. Christensen, ‘The Burden of History in Vernon Lee’s ‘Amour Dure’’, *Studies in the Humanities*, Vol. 16, No.1 (June 1989), 35.

curious conflation of haunting and Paterian aestheticism: “‘A thing of beauty’ may be alive or dead, human or artificial, but either way it is a thing.”⁹² Spiridion echoes Lee’s other acerbic portraits of male connoisseurs of beauty, as the sculptor Waldemar who declares that “[n]o love of mere woman was ever so violent as this love of woman’s mere shape” and the unnamed painter narrating ‘Oke of Okehurst’ who, in a parody of Whistler, “never thought about [desirable woman Alice Oke] as a body ... but merely as a wonderful series of lines” (98, 115). It is a strangely lurid way to describe what is actually a confession of un-sensual attraction.

Consequently, we can see that the dark heart of the text does not turn out to be a Freudian cautionary tale about the return of the repressed. In fact, as was the case in ‘Faustus and Helena’, I suggest what is revealed is the opposite of forbidden sexual desire: the secret lurking within Spiridion’s psyche is a commitment to formal, over embodied, beauty. Or, following Todorov’s concept of fantastic indeterminacy between supernatural and natural explanations, we can place that secret within the Urbanian haunted landscape. The most important clue lies in Spiridion’s resistance to applying “pedantic notions of right or wrong” from his own time on the life and actions of sixteenth-century Medea de Carpi, whether she comes to him dead or alive in. He is a true Paterian aesthete, seeking to conjure Medea without wishing to apply moral standards of his own present, a judgement that he thinks would be anachronistic in relation to Medea’s own lifetime. He is looking to bring back Medea in her “entirety” – her life, her moral standards, and of course her beauty – into his present. But as Christa Zorn points out, Spiridion exemplifies “the limitations of the ‘modern’

⁹² Angela Leighton, ‘Ghosts, Aestheticism, and Vernon Lee’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2000), 2.

mind whose time-transcending consciousness simply reproduces cultural relationships between subject and object, past and present, male and female.”⁹³

By refusing to acknowledge the nature and quality of the historical distance at work between the ghost of Medea and his own present, he commits fully to a fantasy of the knowability of the past, based on an imagined shared aesthetic as well as moral sensibility; his initial disappointment with Umbria’s prosaic nature showed us his vulnerability to such ideas, and his conviction that he knows and understands the Renaissance moral code confirms it. The aesthete’s “impressionist” mode of historical enquiry, of absorption into the aesthetic values of the past to the exclusion of present concerns, here shows itself to be lethal. Sondeep Kandola argues out that “Lee’s Medea promises nothing productive or progressive for the development of the modern mind as, even beyond the grave, Medea continues to exhort men to desperate acts of self-immolation.”⁹⁴ You could say that Spiridion, in his enthusiasm for Medea’s story over the less immersive and evocative history found in Umbria’s landscape, is guilty of favouring Nietzsche’s “monumental history” over all other kinds of historical enquiry. This view of the past contrasts the greatness of the past and of historical individuals to the drab and uninspiring present, much like Spiridion rejects his first impressions of Umbria and its art historical scholarship. Nietzsche cautions that monumental history is dangerous in the wrong hands. Those hands, as is usually the case in Nietzsche, turn out to belong to the “weak and inactive”:

Monumental history is the cloak under which their hatred of present power and greatness masquerades as an extreme admiration of the past: the real meaning of this way of viewing history is disguised as its opposite; whether they wish it or no, they are acting as though their motto were, “let the dead bury the—living.”⁹⁵

⁹³ Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 158.

⁹⁴ Sondeep Kandola, *Writers and Their Work: Vernon Lee* (Tavistock: Northcote Publishing, 2010), 46.

⁹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On the Use and Abuse of History For Life’ (1874), transl. Adrian Collins, in *The German Classics of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Vol. XV: A. Schopenhauer, R. Wagner, F. Nietzsche, Emperor William II* (New York: The German Publication Society, 1914), 355. Peter G. Christensen’s essay first introduced me to the idea that Spiridion’s failure of historical imagination is Nietzschean in scope. However, whereas Christensen thinks Spiridion’s inability to understand Medea is due to his limited

Of course, “the dead” do indeed bury – or at least kill – the “living” in this story. And though one suspects Nietzsche’s definition of “present power and greatness” would look very different from Vernon Lee’s, they share a fear of what a failure of the historical imagination looks like. Spiridion is indeed afraid of letting Medea’s story resonate and be put to use in his own present. Instead, he is eager to escape, to immerse himself, in her world. Spiridion confirms his inflexible mindset when he confesses that “I am wedded to history, to the Past, to women like Lucrezia Borgia” [...] “Where discover nowadays (I confess she haunts me) another Medea da Carpi? (54-55)” I think that to his stern critic and creator Lee, Spiridion fails on many levels, but this mistake may be the most egregious: rather than seeking to incorporate the treasures of the past to enrich his present, he only wants to find exact copies of the art and people of the past that can serve as a venue for his desired immersion in past experience. In his longing to be haunted and even possessed, Spiridion shows an inflexible commitment to his view of the past as Nietzschean “monumental history”, and that actually prevents him from pursuing any meaningful connection with the remnants of that past.

Rosemary Jackson has pointed out that the subversive power of the fantastic, as defined by Todorov, lies in its resistance to metaphor and allegory. Rather than having one object stand in for, or mean, another, the fantastic lets one object or person actually *become* another.⁹⁶ Lee recognised the fantastic tale as the ideal vehicle for a story about the desire to possess, rather than understand and use, the past. In ‘Amour Dure’, that process is hinted at in the protagonist’s professed desire to understand Medea, which is very quickly revealed to be a much more simplistic impulse: a desire to possess the person and, at the moment when he

comprehension of the way women were oppressed in Renaissance Italy, I want to take the Nietzschean context in a different direction, by showing how Spiridion’s failure is bound up in his inability to *use* history, to *apply* it, in his own present. Neither Christensen’s, nor my own, readings suggest any direct correlation of influence between Nietzsche and Lee.

⁹⁶ See Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), 41-42.

believes she is near, to *become* her: “Behind my own image stood another, a figure close to my shoulder, a face close to mine; and that figure, that face, hers! (61)” Spiridion really wishes to reincarnate and even physically inhabit the past, rather than learn from it. As we shall see, ‘Dionea’ develops this idea further. Whereas ‘Amour Dure’ features art works from the past that are misused in the present, ‘Dionea’ brings the supernatural imagination into the present to be misused, with equally miserable results.

‘Dionea’

The young and beautiful Dionea, who may or may not be the goddess Aphrodite incarnate, joins Medea de Carpi on Lee’s list of mysterious seductresses who inspire illicitly formalist-aesthetic (rather than illicitly sexual) passions in the men and women who come near her. Her sudden shipwrecked appearance in a small Italian village is narrated in epistolary form, from the doctor who found her to her distant benefactress Lady Evelyn Savelli. Dr de Rosi’s tone is wryly amused as he relates the reaction of the scandalised villagers to the wild “heathen” girl (she refuses to be Christened) whose only interests as a child seem to be staring longingly out to sea and playing with pigeons:

‘tis a lovely sight, a thing fit for one of your painters, Burne Jones or Tadema, with the myrtle-bushes all around, the white marble chapel steps (all steps are marble in this Carrara country), and the enamel-blue sea through the ilex-branches beyond (82).

Lee is having tremendous fun here, letting the blithely unsuspecting narrator supply clues towards Dionea’s mythical identity, with references to painters known for their languorous portraits of mythical women, as well as traditional Aphrodisian symbols of myrtle plants and the sea – while also gesturing towards Dionea’s future purpose, as a model for art. But she is already having effects not just on the suspicious villagers, but on the doctor himself. Zorn reads the doctor’s comparison of Dionea to a pre-Raphaelite painting as an expression of

increasingly unbridled physical lust for his ward.⁹⁷ But if we remember Rosemary Jackson's explanation of the fantastic as resistant to Freudian sublimation or transference – in literary terms, resistant to metaphoric or allegorical descriptions – we may come up with a different definition of de Rosi's obsession. He confesses to Lady Evelyn that he has begun what he modestly terms "scribbling" once more: "But no longer verses or political pamphlets. I am enthralled by a tragic history, the history of the fall of the Pagan Gods... Have you ever read of their wanderings and disguises, in my friend Heine's little book? (83)" Dionea's presence, we may infer, has guided the Dr de Rosi's writings towards his newfound interest in "tragic history", which to anyone who knows Heine's "little book" (and Lee certainly did) is not so much a history, as a collection of musings on medieval myths that show the gods of the Ancient world in their new characters, as demons and figures of the occult.

By letting the narrator treat the concepts of "history" and "myth" together, Lee sets the tone for what is to come, which is a series of encounters between the supernatural and the historical imagination distilled through the enigmatic figure of Dionea. As in 'Amour Dure', the effects of her interaction with those around her are catastrophic – but unlike the former story, 'Dionea' offers a collective, rather than individual, response. Like the mythical Aphrodite, Dionea acts as an agent, dispensing and dispersing desire. She does not inspire the villagers' infatuation with *her*, but for *each other* – though, as in the case of Spiridion's obsession with Medea, with disastrous results. Wherever Dionea goes, "the young people must needs fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable" (85). An

⁹⁷ Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 150. Zorn argues that the doctor, comparing Dionea to Leonardo da Vinci's models, is so ashamed of his "sensuous indulgence" and increasing physical "arousal" that he "displaces his unspeakable desire into Leonardo's art and thus into a more acceptable context." I think this is a simplification of how Lee uses the supernatural to create uncertainty around the figure of Dionea. Clearly, her similarity to Aphrodite (rather than, say, Hera or Artemis) is significant; Dionea is not only another Aphrodite but also brings to mind Aphrodite's mother Dione and Dionysus, with all his connotations of excess and wildness brought on by loosened inhibitions. There is a strong sense of erotic abandon throughout the story that is produced by the effect Dionea has on the entire village. But, as I argue above, her direct effect is *aesthetic*, whereas the erotic energies released by her presences are directed between villagers rather than towards her own body and person.

“extraordinary love epidemic” even affects the sisters of the local convent, one of which runs off with a sailor and shortly after the nuns’ young confessor dies suddenly, apparently from heartbreak (86). In a way, the disasters in Dionea’s wake help to debunk any theories the reader might have developed after reading ‘Amour Dure’, that what they read was only a story of a particular psyche’s descent into mental illness; ‘Dionea’ shows that an entire village can be equally gripped with the certain kind of madness that comes out of the yearning to immerse oneself in the myth, aesthetics and culture of the past – and to believe that those are one and the same. The mention of Heine’s book matters; through that allusion we are reminded that the demons of the Middle Ages are just the Pagan gods in new clothing. Paul Reitter describes Heine’s account of Venus/Aphrodite in her medieval garb as “animated by a sense of possibility” for the “gods’ rehabilitation” in the modern world.⁹⁸ The villagers are unable to see that different belief systems are “nothing other than cultural practices separated by the effects of time.”⁹⁹ They were instead to use her power and beauty to inspire art that consciously further their own “cultural practices”, the story may have ended differently. As it is, rather than create new history, they only help re-create the old myths of humans as helpless in the grasp of the gods.

The appearance of an Aphrodite-like figure in a nineteenth-century convent helps Lee to visualise historical distance, as two time periods existing contiguously. Like in ‘Faustus and Helena’, past and present are never made one, and the distance between them is not blurred – instead, we are offered an opportunity to compare the two in the mind’s eye of the reader’s own present. The “appearance and disappearance” thrill of the supernatural that I discussed in relation to ‘A Wicked Voice’ and ‘Faustus and Helena’ is also key here; in a

⁹⁸ Paul Reitter, ‘Heinrich Heine and the Discourse of Mythology’ in *A Companion to the Works of Heinrich Heine*, ed. Roger F. Cook (Rochester: Camden House Press, 2002), 214.

⁹⁹ Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 151.

letter responding to her brother's criticism of what he considered the confusing "obscurity" of 'Dionea's' narrative structure, Lee writes:

As regards obscurity in the narrative, I think that if you read it three months hence that would not strike you; for you will regain a habit of twiggling suggestions and of easily following tortuosities of narrative which is the habit of consecutive reading. You will then, I think, agree with me that such a story requires to *appear & reappear & disappear*, to be baffling, in order to acquire its supernatural quality. You see there is not real story; once assert the identity of Dionea with Venus, once show her clearly, & no charm remains.¹⁰⁰

In other words, Lee prefers to insert a reference to Heine's *Gods in Exile* rather than fix Dionea's identity by showing a scene of her reminiscing about her time drinking nectar on Mount Olympus. While we should probably infer that she is connected in some way to the power of the ancient gods, her use and value in the present remains contested: the structure of "appear & reappear & disappear" that Lee so proudly describes to her brother functions as a way to place into doubt the way Dionea's presence should be read. But the indeterminacy of Dionea's moral impact on the present should not be confused for some sort of suspension of temporality; an "appear & reappear & disappear" sequence that disrupts sequential temporality can only thrill if it occurs within the context of clearly delineated past of Ancient Greece, and present of modern Italy that collide, rather than blur or become one.

When the sculptor Waldemar and his wife Gertrude arrive in the village, it seems as if Lee is setting out to show what happens when the art of the past is used to create anew, rather than simply being used as a way to recreate and repeat older patterns. Waldemar, who is initially resistant to using Dionea – he has found "a fisher-boy", whom he much prefers "to any woman" – agrees immediately once Gertrude brings Dionea as a proposed model for a statue of Venus. The doctor is disturbed by his response to Dionea, but is – against his will – drawn in to the project:

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Vernon Lee to Eugene Lee-Hamilton, 31st August 1893 (my italics), quoted in Catherine Maxwell, 'Vernon Lee and Eugene Lee-Hamilton' in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, 31-32.

As I watch him gradually building up his statue, watch the goddess gradually emerging from the clay heap, I ask myself – and the case might trouble a more subtle moralist than me – whether a village girl, an obscure, useless life within the bounds of what we choose to call right and wrong, can be weighed against the possession by mankind of a great work of art, a Venus immortally beautiful? (98)

In a way, what we have here is an image, yet again, of two time periods and their aesthetics colliding in the mind's eye of the viewer; the mythical goddess of ancient times emerging as a result of being embodied in the shape of the illiterate village girl of the present. Of course, the contrast goes beyond historical distance, to the doctor's thoughtless condemnation of Dionea's existence as "useless" as opposed to Waldemar's creation that shows an "immortally beautiful" goddess. And his oblivious callousness signals the narrative's suspicion with an opposition of the greatness of the past, in the form of the goddess and the timeless beauty she is thought to represent, with the trite superstition and narrow-minded provincialism of the present. It is not long before the sculptor Waldemar is driven as mad as Spiridion – but not necessarily for love or lust of Dionea, though his pregnant wife fears this to be the case. But his outburst is one of artistic frustration rather than of thwarted sexual desire:

Do you remember – you, who have read everything – all the bosh of our writers about the Ideal in Art? Why, here is a girl who disproves all this nonsense in a minute; she is far, far more beautiful than Waldemar's statue of her. He said so angrily, only yesterday, when his wife took me into his studio (he has made a studio of the long-desecrated chapel of the old Genoese fort, itself, they say, occupying the site of the temple of Venus).

As he spoke that odd spark of ferocity dilated in his eyes, and seizing the largest of his modelling tools, he obliterated at one swoop the whole exquisite face. Poor Gertrude turned ashy white, and a convulsion passed over her face [...] (100).

Waldemar's problem with Dionea clearly runs much deeper than his possible desire to sleep with her, or guilt at betraying his wife. After a promising start, he begins to realise that his sculpture is unable to recreate the beauty of the Venus who exists right in front of him, that the timeless "Ideal in Art" is outside his reach and no matter how much he tries, Dionea will

always outshine the statue of her likeness. In *Belcaro*, Lee admonishes the Ruskinian pre-Raphaelites and aesthetes that “[t]he work is produced by the man, but not by the whole of him; only by that portion which we call the artist” (177). But Waldemar’s experience shows the direct opposite. His mental state deteriorates, and the doctor blames his sessions with Dionea: “I could never have believed that an artist could regard a woman so utterly as mere inanimate thing, a form to copy [...] no love of mere woman was ever so violent as this love of woman’s mere shape” (98). The story ends with Gertrude mysteriously killed on a sacrificial altar to Venus, and the sculptor throws himself off the rocks into the sea shortly afterwards. Dionea disappears, but Dr de Rosi hears uncertain reports of one final sighting:

...a sailor-boy assures me, by all the holy things [that he saw at dawn] a Greek boat, with eyes painted on the prow, going full sail to sea, the men singing as she went and against the mast, a robe of purple and gold about her, and a myrtle-wreath on her head, leaned Dionea, singing words in an unknown tongue, the white pigeons circling around her (104).

I will return to this final image of Dionea below, but first I want to address what seems to me to be the most burning question of the story, and one I have never seen either asked or answered by readers of Lee: why does Waldemar’s representation of Dionea fail? The question is difficult to answer, not because there are no alternatives, but because there are perhaps too many. The most obvious response is psycho-sexual: Waldemar fears losing control of his desires and is struck with the sculptor’s equivalent of writer’s block as a result. Or you could reply entirely in line with the supernatural elements of the story: Dionea, as the physical incarnation of desire in the goddess’ “real” body, can never be successfully represented by art; her power will always outshine that of any art work. Lee’s most recent biographer Vineta Colby touches on this idea when she argues that ancient mythology was attractive to Lee as a counterpart to modern literature, art and culture because as characters, “[the ancient gods] can move freely and spontaneously; they can be wildly eccentric and

arbitrary without being accountable to common sense or the moral codes of society.”¹⁰¹ But this interpretation directly contradicts Heine, who pointed to the gods not as absolute creatures of one unattainable form, but as malleable beings readily made and remade by each era and culture that finds uses for them. They are thus not beings living outside “the moral codes of society”, but beings used very differently, under the heading of very different “moral codes”, in each new setting and guise that they appear.

This brings me back to my earlier assertion about Lee’s refutation of aestheticism on the one hand, and of Ruskin’s moral correlation between art and the period of its creation on the other: in her fiction, she resists what she sees as Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelites’ sentimental attachment to the past and its art, but she also firmly pushes back against the aestheticist temptation to void art of moral meaning altogether.¹⁰² But the meaning of art has to be created anew – and Waldemar, for all his skill, only ever seeks a “mere shape” for “a form to copy”, to produce yet another Venus, in blind and thoughtless imitation of the masterpieces by ancient and renaissance artists. His wife is no better; her response when encountering Dionea is that “she will do for a Venus” (97). The sculptor’s failure to match Dionea’s beauty in his art does not mean there are no successful artistic renditions of Venus – but, I argue, his failure shows that in the world of Lee’s fiction, it is not enough to simply reproduce older models in the hope of matching their greatness.

We have thus seen two failures of integration of the mythical past into the present: the villagers’ superstitious treatment of Dionea as the village witch, and the artist’s obsession with her as an “mere inanimate thing” (echoing Spiridion’s mechanistic appreciation of the separate parts of Medea’s body) to copy, rather than as a source of inspiration or guidance, to re-imagine his art into new shapes and guises. But the sailors that we see in the last little

¹⁰¹ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 237.

¹⁰² Again, I want to stress that I am deliberately referring to a highly schematic, simplified version of Paterian aestheticism, in order to better show Lee’s relationship to aestheticism (as I believe she perceived it) on the one hand, and the Victorian sense of the past represented by Ruskin and Carlyle (among others) on the other.

vignette seem to fare much better in their relationship with Dionea. If the “sailor-boy” is to be trusted, their shared existence looks idyllic: “the men singing” while Dionea, wrapped in her traditional colours of purple and gold, can finally spend her days as she wishes, staring at the sea while surrounded by her beloved pigeons. The ship “going full sail to sea” paints a picture of vitality and collaboration carried out further by the description of both the men and Dionea as “singing”. ‘Dionea’ is not a proto-feminist tale of a victimised village girl (who has been called “obscure and useless” by her benefactor) travelling a road to empowerment – the story does not end with Dionea sailing off by herself, but instead it describes her as decorating other sailors’ environment. We see Dionea, who is no more a “real” woman now than back at the village, remaining an archetype of myth and the mythical past – except now she is absorbed and embraced in these men’s’ lives and daily work. She is no longer creating disasters, because she is no longer considered a dangerous outsider, or an unattainable ideal of beauty. She is neither; instead she is seamlessly participating in others’ lives, enhancing the life and beauty of a working ship.

‘Oke of Okehurst’

In ‘Faustus and Helena’, I showed that what drives Lee’s definition of the supernatural imagination is actually the historically credible, simultaneous evocation of two different eras, meticulously recreated in the reader’s mind. What was a case of literary immersion in the past in early or mid-Victorian texts, must here be deemed “supernatural” to achieve the same effect of thrilling historical distance. In ‘Faustus and Helena’, we are offered (in typically florid prose) “the spectre of Antiquity, ever young, beautiful, radiant, though risen from the putrescence of two thousand years; and the Middle Ages, alive but toothless, palsied and tottering” (73-74). ‘Amour Dure’ and ‘Dionea’ both recreate that sense of the past to some extent, through their shared focus on the historical distance between a particular era and

aesthetic – the renaissance and the ancient, respectively – and the effects of its art in the present. But in ‘Oke of Okehurst: Or, The Phantom Lover’, that careful rendition of the distance between two particular time periods turns into a chaotic patchwork of jumbled art works and visual markers from many, many different epochs. The “forlorn and vast” Okehurst Manor, where William Oke and his wife Alice resides, is stuffed to the rafters with family portraits, medieval suits of armour, sixteenth-century Persian rugs, seventeenth-century Tuscan furniture, oak carvings and coats of arms from across the Okes’ long past. To the first-person narrator, a nameless visiting portrait painter, each object seems to be giving off a sense of pastness, as the mantel-piece that gives off a scent of roses “put into the china bows by the hands of ladies long since dead” and the clock plays “a faint silvery tune of forgotten days” (118). The effect is of eerie stillness, created by the manor’s immersion in a variety of pasts: “It seemed to me that I was being led through the palace of the Sleeping Beauty” (111). But Alice Oke is not a fairy-tale creature, though the painter is certainly enchanted upon seeing her:

It is conceivable, is it not, that once in a thousand years there may arise a combination of lines, a system of movements, an outline, a gesture, which is new, unprecedented, and yet hits off exactly our desires for beauty and rareness? (114)

It is hard not to think here of Whistler’s series of “arrangements”, “symphonies” and “nocturnes” that all feature a woman depicted in a certain colour or set of colours.¹⁰³ But like Spiridion and Waldemar, the portrait painter who tells us the story has difficulty pinpointing just what exactly fascinates him so strongly in the woman’s appearance. At first, it seems as if this is because she is timeless in her beauty – the artist’s quote brings to mind, again, Lee’s not-so-gentle critique of aestheticism’s brutal reduction of the women they try to recreate in

¹⁰³ See Figures 1 and 2 at the end of this chapter for Whistler’s *Symphony in White 1* and *2* (1862, 1864). The editors of *Hauntings* speculate that the portrait painter may be based on both Whistler and Lee’s friend, John Singer Sargent.

art to a series of “lines” that correspond to the viewer’s “desires for beauty and rareness”. However, the artist’s appreciation of Alice is the opposite of atemporal or vague; only “once in a thousand years”, in fact, does the combination of particular shapes and lines come together to form a creature like Alice Oke. But this artist is as frustrated as Lee’s other artist characters, because even though he feels he understands her and appreciates her beauty (he wonders “whether anyone ever understood Alice Oke besides myself”), he also finds that Alice’s beauty evades his art: “Something – and that the very essence – always escapes, perhaps because real beauty is as much a thing in time – a thing like music, a succession, a series – as in space” (114-115).

Lest we think that Lee is interested in solely making a point about the gendered eye of the artist spectator, we are also shown that Alice, in her obsession with the ghosts of the past that she believes inhabit the manor, is no better than the painter; she spends hours contemplating family portraits but “takes no more heed of [her husband] than of a table or a chair” (117). Like the painter, Alice fails to see the people around her as live human beings, rather than as objects. But in the world of Lee’s supernatural stories, objects are never just dead things, and Alice’s confusion between animate and inanimate things is perhaps understandable. Athena Vrettos writes of the interior of Okehurst Manor that “objects such as clothing, art, and furniture offer material links between the past and the present that have the power to occupy the minds of the living through the emotional traces or “mental fossils” of their previous owners.”¹⁰⁴ Vrettos reads Alice’s absorption in the objects around her that serve as mementos or “mental fossils” of the people inhabiting the same space in the past as a way to conceptualize the “intermingling of personal and ancestral identity.” Alice and William, as cousins, are both descendants of a Jacobean love triangle between the original

¹⁰⁴ Athena Vrettos, ““In the Clothes of Dead People”: Vernon Lee and Ancestral Memory”, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Winter 2013), 208.

Alice Oke, her husband Nicholas and a visiting poet named Christopher Lovelock. Lovelock was thought to be murdered by highwaymen, but rumours persist that it was in fact Nicholas, “accompanied by his wife dressed as a groom” (121).

This hint of cross-dressing, subsequently repeated by the modern Alice, has encouraged modern critics like Vrettos to read Alice’s obsession with her ancestor as an empowering “means of expressing homoerotic desire.”¹⁰⁵ In light of Lee’s biography I can see the appeal of that interpretation. But in fact the most poignant object of the past is not the groom outfit that Alice puts together, but the original Alice’s elaborately decorated wedding dress, which Mrs Oke hides in her room and only brings out when she is sure to be alone. The painter never sees the dress, but imagines Mrs Oke “sitting in that yellow room – that room which no Oke of Okehurst save herself ventured to remain in alone, in the dress of her ancestress” (130). That yellow drawing-room is in itself a marker of the supernatural; Mr Oke refuses to remain in it for more than a minute at a time, whereas his wife seeks it out and remains in it for hours at a time, sitting alone and staring, seemingly, at nothing. Thus, the reader probably shares the painter’s surprise when he finds out that the yellow room was not the site of the original murder: “That is just the extraordinary circumstances,” Mrs Oke tells him, “that, as far as any one knows, nothing ever did happen there; and yet that room has an evil reputation.” At Okehurst Manor, it seems, the sense of pastness pervading each corner is not just produced by the actual past, but of what is to come. Alice wonders if the room is haunted by what “is destined to happen there in the future” and of course she is right; Alice Oke is found in the original Alice’s wedding gown, killed by her husband (125). William Oke – driven to madness by his wife’s obsession with the past – afterwards kills himself in the very yellow drawing-room which he had always feared to enter.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 209.

What are we to make of this reversal of the conventional ghost story's association between place and time? Vineta Colby, who finds the story disappointing in comparison to Lee's other supernatural tales, considers the manor itself to be "only a plot device, useful because a story of the supernatural requires an appropriate framework for atmosphere and mood."¹⁰⁶ But I think this nod to contiguous temporality, with the possibility of haunting being turned on its head with the future hanging over the present, shows that the historical *bric-à-brac* of Okehurst Manor provides a more vital function in the tale than Colby allows. Alice and William – who are first cousins and therefore already arguably live in too-close proximity to their ancestors – resemble Spiridion Trepka, in that they seek out their own haunting, therefore creating doubt in the reader's mind as to whether what we are reading is a story of mental illness or of supernatural occurrences. But whereas the young scholar in 'Amour Dure' is so disappointed with the drabness of present-day Umbria that he actively seeks out the ghost of Medea so that he can come "face to face with the Past", Alice and her husband experience a daily sensory overload of pastness through the vast collection of historical art and objects that surrounds them in their home. The overwhelmed portrait painter describes the effect as "a special kind of voluptuousness, peculiar and complex and indescribable, like the half-drunkenness of opium and haschisch" (112). Here I want to return to the use of Heine's reading of Greek mythology in 'Dionea'. Christa Zorn's consequent suggestion is that it shows Lee's tendency to "visualiz[e] historical time synchronically (rather than diachronically) in one and the same place."¹⁰⁷ Okehurst Manor certainly fulfills that task, providing an environment that creates an abundance of associations with many different pasts. But neither the Okes nor the visiting painter are able to make any real use of these artifacts of the past – instead, they use them as a drug, as an "opium" to forget whatever

¹⁰⁶ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 234.

¹⁰⁷ Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 151.

is troubling them in the present. Unlike the sailors who integrate the aspects of the ancient goddess embodied in Dionea into their (both metaphysical and actual) journey, the Okes only seek to reiterate patterns established in an era so different from their own that when they repeat its actions, feelings and art, all they manage to create is another scene of haunting. Their future is already set, because they are unable to break out of the pattern they think they perceive in the past.

Conclusion: Vernon Lee's Solution to the Puzzle

In this chapter, I have focused on Vernon Lee's fiction and essays about the supernatural, because I think that concept provides her with the most potent material to address her concerns about the relationship between art objects and historical distance. Lee understood that the thrill of historical distance between the past and present, made visible and concrete by the art of the past that has survived to be viewed in the present, held a particular power for readers trained throughout the nineteenth century to imagine the past in their mind's eye. But due to the changes in Lee's own time within the increasingly separate spheres of history and literature, that power came to be represented as supernatural. However, as an extremely accomplished reader of art and culture from much further back than the Victorian period, she also understood that "[t]o raise a real spectre of the Antique is a craving of our *own* century" (228, my italics). What began as a Victorian revolutionary invention, can also equally be seen as a particularly Victorian malady of spirit. Late-Victorian readers were practiced in immersion in the past, but they were also beginning to forget that the premise of the resurrection of the past is its absence; historical distance is only useful if we understand the difference it points to between past and present. Therefore, I suggest, Lee gives us a series of stories that point to the ways in which we must re-learn (and Lee's characters really learn the

hard way, if they ever learn at all) historical distance as a way to impact the future. In

‘Puzzles of the Past’ (1904), Lee summarises some of the concerns I have pointed to in her fiction, but this time in essay form:

There they hang, our great-grandfathers and mothers and uncles and aunts (or some one’s else, more likely), painted by Reynolds or Raeburn, delightful persons whose ghosts we would give anything to meet. Their ghosts; aye, there’s the rub. *For their ghosts would have altered with posthumous experience, would have had glimpses of the world we live in, and somewhat conformed to its habits;* but could we really get on with the living men and women of former days? It is true that we understand and enjoy the books which they read, or rather a small number of pages out of a smaller number of books. But did they read them in the same way? I should not wonder if the different sense in which we took their favourite authors, or rather the different sense in which we discovered that they were in the habit of taking them, created considerable coolness, not to say irritation, between the ghosts of the readers of “The Vicar of Wakefield,” or “Werther,” or the “Nouvelle Heloise” and ourselves.¹⁰⁸

Lee’s ghosts and encounters with the past are shaped indelibly by the present. Even if the beautiful Reynolds portraits of our “great-grandfathers and mothers” were to come alive, step into our living room and bring with them an exciting sense of the past from which they came, they are nevertheless never accessible as pure experiences of pastness; instead we must accept that the ghosts will be shaped by “the world we live in, and [will have] somewhat conformed to its habits.” And to Lee, the surprising optimist in an era of anxious pessimism about the future, that does not have to be a bad thing. She argues that

[...] any art sprung really from the present will have to be of the nature, not of the painting or sculpture of old days, of the architecture which made each single cathedral an individual organism, but of the nature rather of process engraving, of lithography (are not our posters, Chèret’s, for instance, the only thing which our masses see, as their distant forbears saw frescoes in churches and *campo santos*?), of book printing [...] (192).

That a devoted student of the high art and architecture of the past should suggest that her contemporaries move away from those models and seek inspiration in the emerging technologies of the present is not a little surprising. But Lee is not being merely a pragmatist

¹⁰⁸ Vernon Lee, ‘Puzzles of the Past’ in *Hortus Vitae: Essays on the Gardening of Life* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1904), 192-193. My italics. All further references will be given in brackets in the text.

here; unlike many of her aesthete (and future modernist) colleagues, she is not just outlining the inevitable results of a losing battle against the popular art expressions of modernity. She is suggesting that the nineteenth century, in its fascination with the contrasts between past and present, has through that very process managed to create such a fundamental break with the past that we can no longer look back, but must look forward. Lee's present-day is the product of a century's worth of training to imagine the past in all its glory and difference. But the eras before the nineteenth century did not care about historical distance and difference in the same way, and so they can no longer, paradoxically, serve as our inspiration:

...is time an unbroken continuity, all its subdivisions merely conventional, like those of postal districts; or, as I suggested above, are there real chains of mountains, chasms, nay, deep oceans, breaking up its surface; and *do we not belong, we people of the nineteenth century, rather to the future which we are forming than to the Past which, much to its astonishment (I should think), produced us?* (194-195, my italics)

It is a beautiful distillation of Lee's particular brand of historical consciousness: she shrugs off the sentimental worship of the past that she thinks has characterized her century in favour of an exciting and as yet uncreated future – but at the same time, she makes sure the reader continues to always carry the past with them, by imagining the “astonishment” with which those portraits on the wall would react if they could see the nineteenth-century sense of the past being transformed and transfigured to make an impact and become the past of future generations.

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Appendices to Chapter 2: Figures 1-5

Figure 1: *Bird & Anemone* (1882) by William Morris



Figure 2: *Fruit* (1864) by William Morris



Figure 3: *Brother Rabbit* (1882) by William Morris

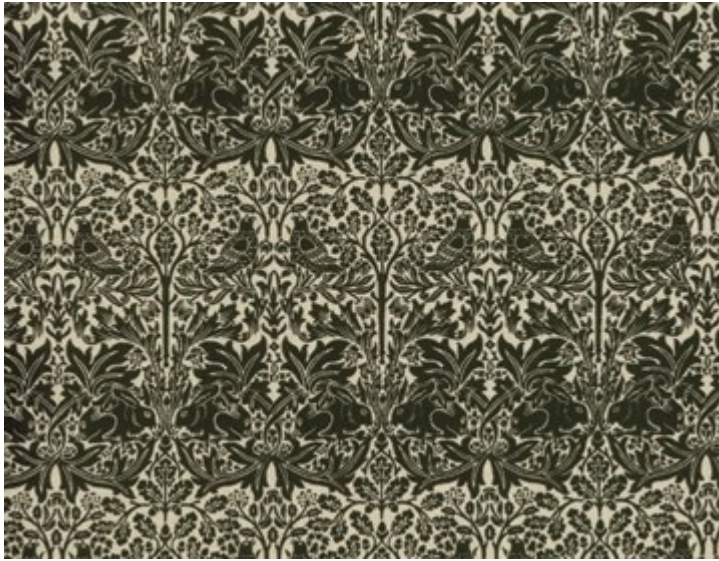


Figure 4: *The Knight's Farewell* (1858) by Edward Burne-Jones

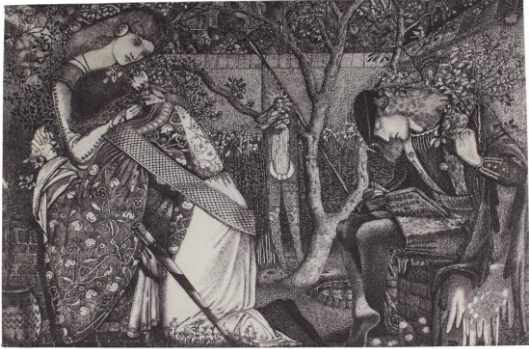
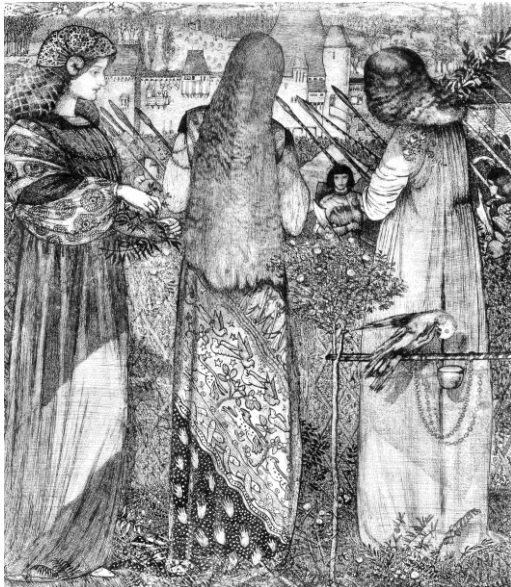


Figure 5: *Going to the Battle* (1858) by Edward Burne-Jones



Appendices to Chapter 3: Figures 1-4

Figure 1. 'The Blind Scholar and His Daughter'



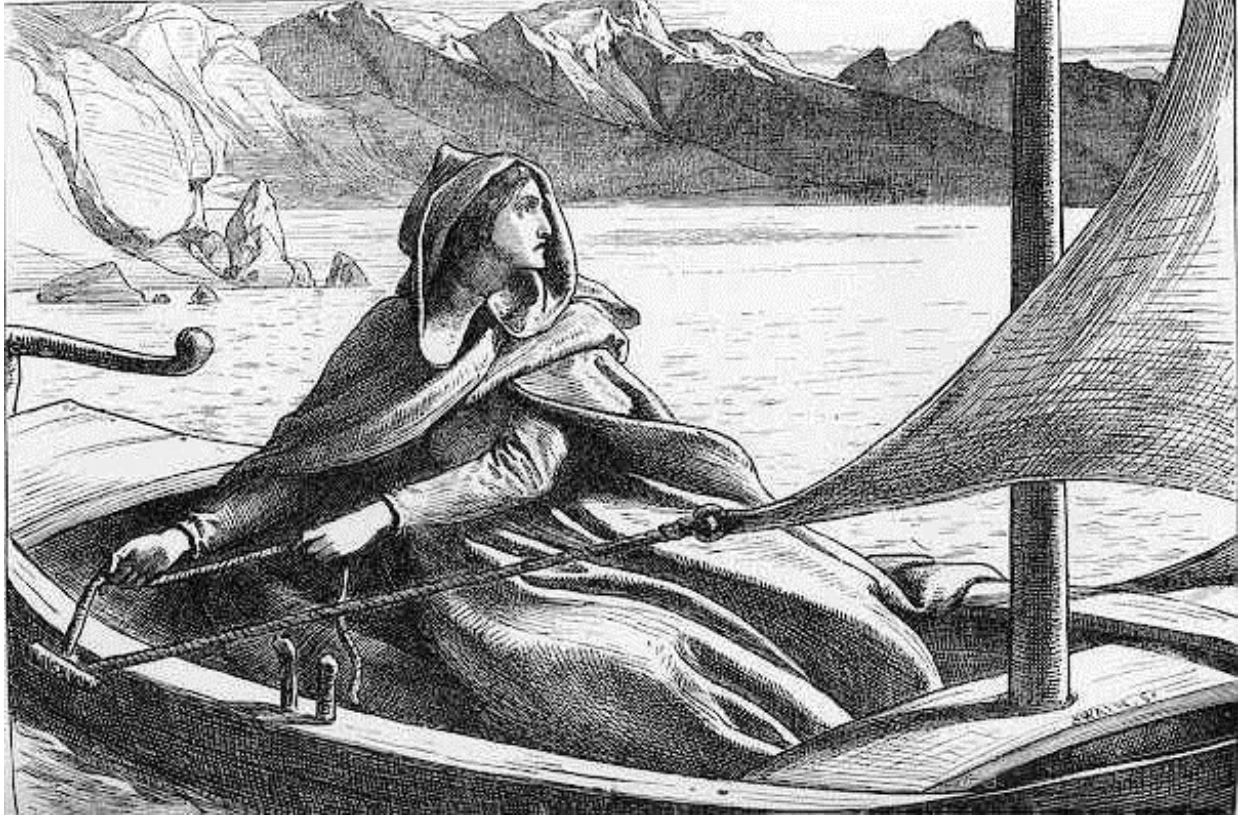
Figure 2. 'Tessa At Home'



Figure 3. 'Escaped'



Figure 4. 'Drifting Away'



Appendices to Chapter 4: Figures 1-2

Figure 1. James Abbot McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White No 1: The White Girl* (1862)



Figure 2. James Abbot McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White No 2: The Little White Girl* (1864)

