Abstract

*Love’s Perception* explores nineteenth-century narratives about people, places, and things which “are still what they were,” in all the quietness of John Stuart Mill’s phrase. William Wordsworth, Alfred Tennyson, and George Eliot cultivated a capacity to dwell on familiar objects as they are already known, without expecting further change. In their works, lingering back—especially when others hurry forward—discloses an aesthetic attuned to perceptions made slight by familiarity. For instance, Tennyson’s mariners remain behind on Lotos-land to listen dreamily to the intimate sounds of their bodies at rest—to whispers, breaths, and heartbeats. Forgoing the charm of novelty and the pull of the unknown, the narratives which I read evoke the sustaining pleasure found in feelings which we already know in full. Collectively, they recreate aesthetic experience as a field of loving attachment rather than vivid transport.

I trace the contrasting aesthetic orientations of lingering over the known and of anticipating the unknown to a crisis in perception first formulated within late eighteenth-century empiricist philosophy. Perceptions give us knowledge, but they fade away when they have done so. Colors, noises, scents that once vividly leapt out at us gradually recede behind what Romantic writers variously describe as the “film,” “veil,” or “mist” of familiarity. This happens just as surely when we care for an object; as Eliot mourns, “the sense slips off from each loved thing.” Thus many nineteenth-century writers described familiarity as incompatible with aesthetic perception. They looked to art to counter sensory decline, defining aesthetic experience around the curious pursuit of new sensations or the fleeting defamiliarization of old ones.

By contrast, the writers I take up make room for love, intimacy, and fidelity within
aesthetic engagement. Following Edmund Burke, who lays out a conservative aesthetic in his writings on the French Revolution, they seek to sustain a tempered delight in staying with well-known objects in all their familiarity. They recover feelings that would go unnoticed amidst anything intensely new: Wordsworth’s “pleasure which there is in life itself,” Tennyson’s music falling more lightly than rose petals do on grass, or Eliot’s “sweet monotony” of steady sunlight. Their works bring to salience the slighter pressures of sensory continuity amidst the more forceful insistence of change. Read together, they articulate a nineteenth-century literary tradition of aesthetic satisfaction with the given.
Contents

Abstract iii

Contents v

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction: Perceptual Decay and Burke’s Aesthetics of Conservation 1

Novelty and Intellectual Life ........................................... 3
Novelty and Aesthetic Life ............................................. 10
Edmund Burke and the French Revolution ......................... 19
Burke and Narrating Conservation .................................. 28
After Burke ................................................................... 32

1 “Blind Love”: Wordsworth’s Feeling for the Insensible 36

“We live by admiration and by love” ................................ 37
“There are in our existence spots of time” ......................... 44
“Michael” .................................................................. 49

2 How to Exist Where You Are: A Lesson in Lotos-Eating 62

Imaginative Imperialism .................................................. 63
Night-Bats and Sea-Fairies .............................................. 69
“The Lotos-Eaters” ......................................................... 75
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coda: Tennyson and Aestheticism</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 “Doomed to Live”: The Fate of Eliot’s Aesthetic Humanism</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar Sensations in <em>The Mill on the Floss</em></td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artificial Life in <em>The Lifted Veil</em></td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defacing Jubal</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

My dissertation is partly about the pleasures of staying in one place, but for all this it was written across four cities, five apartments, and dozens of excursions short and long. Along the way I have had many welcome occasions for gratitude, not least to the Donald and Mary Hyde Fellowship Fund, the Northeast Modern Language Association, the Association of Princeton Graduate Alumni, and the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies for supporting my research.

I am deeply grateful to my advisors, Esther Schor, Deborah Nord, and Meredith Martin, whose sustained, searching, and generous engagement with my work has kept me steady, kept me going, and taken this project further than I could have imagined at its outset. For years of encouragement and challenge, and for so much more, I thank them. I also thank Esther Schor for her pedagogical guidance: teaching poetry alongside her was an experience I always remember with joy. Susan Stewart and Susan Wolfson have given much-appreciated inspiration and feedback at different stages of writing the dissertation. At Oxford, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst kindly provided a home away from home for me in the English Faculty. And Christopher Rovee, who first taught me how to think and write about poetry with love, modeled an intellectual grace that I have aspired to ever since.

I have been lucky to be part of a department filled with interlocutors and friends. Maayan Dauber, Dan and Julie Johnson, Matt Krumholtz, Ariana Reilly, and Matt Steding have been there from the first, while others have been beside me at crucial points along the way, including Chelsea Adewunmi, Veronica Alfano, Renee Fox, Rae Gaubinger, Priyanka Jacob, Ross Lerner,
Jen Minnen, Kyessa Moore, and Roz Parry. From other places, Julie Camarda and Naomi Levine, as well as Cristina Richieri Griffin, have given me sanity and camaraderie. A writing group led by Susan Wolfson, with Ella Brians, Dan Johnson, Megan Quinn, Maria Paola Svampa, and Emily Vasiliauskas, has been a welcome haven for preparing work for the wider world, and helped get my second chapter into shape. Pat Guglielmi holds the department together, and has made it all possible.

Many other friends, too many to name, have given me emotional support at times when I most needed it, especially Katie Abrahamson, Charity and Matt Anderson, Thea Goodsell, Mia Malhotra, Suzy Tollerud, and Elena Wistey. Most of all I am grateful to my family, for their patience and love, and for the joy of being part of their lives: to my parents Joyce and John Sanford; to Zach and Allison Gill Sanford; to my parents-in-law Janet and Marc Russell, and to Brian and Anni Russell and Elizabeth and Michael Holland. Finally, first and last and in between, to Jeffrey Sanford Russell, with whom I am always at home.
For Jeffrey

I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud
About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,
Put out broad leaves, and soon there’s nought to see
Except the straggling green which hides the wood.
Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood
I will not have my thoughts instead of thee
Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly
Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee
Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!
Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,
I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)
Introduction:

Perceptual Decay and Burke’s Aesthetics of Conservation

Images grow dull by repetition, as bodies are worn away by friction.

Hippolyte Taine

Every thing is spoilt by use.

John Keats

What if, just by looking, we could use the world up: drain its color, muffle its noise, make the whole sensory fabric wear out and crumble away? In what follows I trace a line of thought through the eighteenth and nineteenth century that describes perception as appearing to erode objects in touching them. This line passes through the works of major figures in philosophy and physiology, from Thomas Reid and Joseph Priestley to Alexander Bain and George Henry Lewes, and in aesthetics, including Edmund Burke, Richard Payne Knight, William Hazlitt, and John Ruskin. But the idea of perceptual decay is not limited to these figures—or to any one school of thought—and in following its ramifications I draw also on lesser-known writers and on popular literature and media. In this line of thinking, we do not perceive objects in the same way from moment to moment, but rather our perception of them changes according to how well we know
what we’re looking at. Seeing something for the first time is not like seeing it for the fiftieth: hues, textures, scents that once vividly leapt out at us recede as they become familiar, fading into the background of our awareness. And this fading prompts us to seek out something else in their stead; as the nineteenth-century philosopher Thomas Brown argues, “we are desirous of the new, because the old, which itself was once new, presents to us no longer the same delight.”¹ Thus Wordsworth describes how a “little rill” of water which entrances us at first, slides away in attention when a “cuckoo’s shout” rings out, and never regains its focal prominence. In becoming used to something we seem to use it up in perception. We know it well, but we no longer perceive it clearly.

In the first half of this chapter, I explore the importance of perceptual decline to accounts of curiosity, explaining how the desire for new sensations to replace those we have lost to decay draws us out into intellectual discovery and imaginative expansion. But the thought that objects sensibly erode as we come to know them problematically constrains aesthetic experience, if that experience requires vivid sense perceptions, by implying that we can only vividly perceive aesthetic objects as long as they are unfamiliar to us. Writers on aesthetics wrestle with this constraint, beginning with Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and continuing up through mid-Victorian art criticism. In the chapter’s second half I argue that Burke, in his writings on the French Revolution, reckons with novelty’s power on the mind by positing a counter-role for culture in clinging to the old. Burke seeks to realign the imagination with this cultural bias, turning it towards recovering aesthetic pleasure in familiar, faded sensations. Thus he develops a mode of aesthetic conservation, structured around lingering with old feelings rather than striving to seek out the new.

My larger dissertation will engage perceptual decay through three nineteenth-century literary writers’ projects of what we might describe as perceptual sustainability, modeled along lines similar to Burke’s aesthetic conservation. These writers—William Wordsworth, Alfred Tennyson, and George Eliot—each worried about what perceptions’ decline meant for aesthetic

---

life. Wordsworth describes how the mind’s attraction to “glaring spectacle, or new” takes us away from “the common sights / Which Earth presents”; Tennyson expresses weariness with a poetics dependent on exotic imagery for its effect; and Eliot mourns how “the sense slips off from each loved thing,” making it hard to see what is most familiar. In response they sought to recover a residual pleasure in what had already been worn down in perception: rather than throw these things into the memory’s dustbin, they wanted to hold on to their fainter sensuous forms. They each experiment in writing narratives which are structured not by curiosity, by the pursuit of what is new or the eventful unfolding of plot, but rather by pleasure found in staying behind. Read together, their works recreate aesthetic experience as a field of intimate attachment rather than strange transport.

**Novelty and Intellectual Life**

To trace the origin of the idea of perceptual decay is to go back to the early modern turn to empiricism, when the mind was thrown on sense experience as its main source of knowledge. For a theory of mind in which we are born as “white paper, void of all characters,” in Locke’s famous image, needs to account not only for where we get our knowledge but also for why we get our knowledge, and so much, so fast—that is, why we do not simply remain content with experiencing only a small set of frequently repeated sensations. Philosophers concerned to explain why we acquire knowledge posited that we do so because new sensations affect us more strongly than those we already know. Hume argues in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738) that “every thing, that is new, is most affecting, and gives us either more pleasure or pain, than what, strictly speaking, naturally belongs to it. When it often returns upon us, the novelty wears off; the passions subside; the hurry

---


of the spirits is over; and we survey the objects with greater tranquillity.”

Newness heightens pleasure or pain, and thus what is new attracts more attention than what is familiar: here we already get an intimation of perceptions’ decline, as the “hurry” of animal spirits subsiding with an object’s repetition mean that it is affecting us less. But novelty not only intensifies objects’ effect on us, whatever that effect may be; newness is “in itself very agreeable,” by exciting the “moderate degree” of mental activity in which we find pleasure (271). Thus an encounter with a new object is twofold: it gives us the stimulating pleasure of newness in itself, and it also heightens whatever pleasure or pain we receive from that object. The former keeps us seeking out new sensations once others have grown familiar, in order to feel the same pleasurable mental agitation; the latter allows whatever new sensations we encounter to make a deep impression on our mind.

We can see how Hume’s picture, in which we frantically engage new objects only to regard them with cooler “tranquillity” once our frenzy passes, allows us to continually acquire new knowledge. A 1741 article in *The Scots Magazine* on “the love of Novelty” explains our quickly-wearing pleasure as facilitating intellectual development:

> The fickleness in young minds; the continual shifting from one thing to another; the ardent longings after new playthings, which no sooner attained but, grown familiar, are loathed and thrown aside; is all the effect of this passion, and stores the mind with that variety of ideas it so quickly acquires in the first years of life. These ideas would come in but slowly, were the likings of children steady, and were they not hurried by their curiosity from object to object.

This account describes early interactions with the world as essentially unstable. From birth we display intellectual caprice, ready to give favor to new objects and just as ready to retract it

---

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 271. Although a powerful reaction to novelty was most crucial to a robust empiricism like Hume’s, it was also central to rationalist models of mind—which, as Daniel N. Robinson notes, involved many empiricist elements as well. Many rationalist writers, notably René Descartes and Nicolas Malebranche, described “admiration,” “wonder,” or “curiosity”—all of these bent towards novelty—as primary mental faculties or passions. Malebranche formulates the effect of novelty slightly differently from Hume: “Such things as bear the Character of Novelty … agitate us very much, striking the Brain in places that are most sensible, because least exposed to the Course of the Spirits.” Daniel N. Robinson, *An Intellectual History of Psychology* (Madison: Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Nicolas Malebranche, *Father Malebranche His Treatise*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: W. Bowyer, 1700), 23.

from old ones, finding delight above all in new conquests rather than in “steady” relationships. And this ever-shifting engagement is necessary to our intellectual progress—not just in childhood, but throughout our life. As Laurence Sterne drolly comments in a 1766 sermon, without the “curiosity of seeing new things … carrying forward the mind to fresh inquiry and knowledge,” “the mind (I fear) would doze for ever over the present page.” If everything continued to interest us just as it did at first, why would we ever want to learn anything new?

This vision of a special relation to new things, which I have briefly touched on in empiricist theory of mind and in broader eighteenth-century culture, was central to both of these areas. Barbara Benedict has argued that as “empiricism … extended to all corners of English culture” over the eighteenth century, “curiosity was reconceived as the very identity of mankind.” And curiosity, which Edmund Burke glosses as “whatever desire we have for, or whatever pleasure we take in, novelty,” describes the delight we take in new things merely because they are new. Curiosity drives us to hurry through the world much as Hume’s animal spirits hurry through the mind; since newness dissipates with contact, inasmuch as our pleasure in things depends on their newness we must stay intellectually on the move, constantly acquiring different sensations. We are led to travel swiftly from place to place, mentally taking up new objects and then tossing them aside, in a bid to keep up ever-declining delight. Thus a view of humans as essentially curious animals, such as the one Benedict finds in the eighteenth century, is one in which we are always looking for what we don’t yet have—for what is unfamiliar, what is remote, or what is in the undisclosed future.

Benedict acknowledges this in her account of “humanity’s traditionally insatiable appetite” as

---

9Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, following Max Weber, argue that the Enlightenment signals the disenchantment of the world. I would add that the mind becomes the instrument of that disenchantment, by wearing down the gloss of whatever it handles. But Adorno and Horkheimer don’t note how closely enlightenment is bound up with enchantment all the while: if we must disarm and master the unknown, we are led on to do so by the elusive “charm of novelty.” Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford University Press, 2002).
“always transgressive, always a sign of the rejection of the known as inadequate, incorrect, even uninteresting” (4). Curiosity, inasmuch as it shapes our experience of the world, consigns much of life to discontent.

But Benedict’s discussion of curiosity in appetitive terms only tells half of the story. For many eighteenth-century writers, our intellectual hunger for new knowledge could only be understood within a general theory of perception that described objects as affecting us less as they grow more familiar. To use Burke’s terminology, the “passion” of curiosity in our minds is attuned to the “power” of novelty in the objects that affect us; the one cannot be explained without the other. That is to say, it is not just that we carelessly discard one thing because we crave something else, but it is also that whatever we take up begins to fall away from our awareness even as we handle it. As something becomes less new to us it compels less of our attention, blending in with the objects around it and freeing our mind to engage with something else. And while we might be able to curb our curious cravings—and as Benedict notes, early modern writers often cautioned against indulging curiosity to excess—it’s not clear that we can do as much to change our perceptual experience. I recognize curiosity in Benedict’s appetitive framing, but I focus on the story’s other half: what about the perceptual context that was seen to shape this appetite, in which new things appeared more vibrant than old?

Samuel Johnson—whom Patricia Meyer Spacks has described as heroically fighting off his own waning interest in things—popularized the idea of perceptual decay in a way that significantly shapes later discussions. 10 The History of Rasselas (1759) is a fable about the tragic falling-off of sensory delights, in which “the sounds, that pleased me yesterday, weary me to-day, and will grow yet more wearisome to-morrow,” prompting the prince’s fruitless journey through the world to find some pleasure that will stay. 11 And Johnson’s widely-reprinted essays paint a similar picture of futility in characterizing our perceptual relation to the world. In a 1750 essay in The Rambler,

describing how “our gratifications are volatile, vagrant, and easily dissipated,” he laments the
difficulty of altering our perceptions:

The manner in which external force acts upon the body is very little subject to the
regulation of the will; no man can at pleasure obtund or invigorate his senses, prolong
the agency of any impulse, or continue the presence of any image traced upon the eye,
or any sound infused into the ear.\textsuperscript{12}

No matter how hard we try, the world is sensibly taken from us: “the fragrance of the jessamine
bower is lost after the enjoyment of a few moments, and the Indian wanders among his native spices,
without any sense of their exhalations.” As we grow used to things we use up their appearances,
finding dimness where once there was light, subdued sound where once there was lively music.
Thus our perceptual life becomes littered over time with discarded objects, old things which pile
up to be “thrust aside into some remote repository of the mind, and lie[ ] among other lumber of
the memory, overlooked and neglected.” Johnson’s “remote repository” clarifies the dark side of
the life shaped by curiosity; curiosity drives us to acquire new and exciting sensations, but it leaves
a trail of used-up and uninteresting objects in its wake.

The tendency of things to fall away from our awareness was gradually formulated over the
eighteenth century as a law of perception. Joseph Priestley sums up this “law” in a 1762 lecture:
“the oftener any sensations are repeated, the less we are affected by them.”\textsuperscript{13} It’s important to
realize that this is a description of perception, not of memory or of emotion: we may remember
familiar objects perfectly well, and we may love them dearly, but we don’t sense them like we once
did.\textsuperscript{14} Familiarity dulls perception, and we project this dullness onto the world. Priestley makes
this process primarily a function of attention:

\textsuperscript{12}Samuel Johnson, \textit{The Rambler}, no. 78 (December 1750).
Both previous to the perception of any new object, if we have any intimation of it, and immediately upon the perception of it, whether it be a new scene in nature, a new train of adventures, or a new system of principles, the mind is full of expectation, and is eagerly employed in surveying it; which keeps the attention strongly awake, and gives the object an opportunity of making a deep impression. Whereas, when this first curiosity is gratified, and the object is become familiar, we view it in a more cursory and superficial manner; there being then no reason for so close an attention to it, as we expect no new knowledge or information. (146–7)

Compared to Johnson’s account, Priestley’s emphasis on our fickle attention as causing us to lose the opportunity of “a deep impression” raises a more hopeful possibility: even if objects seem to fall away from us as they become familiar, perhaps we can still recover them at will. But doing so would require us to resist our natural tendency to attend to the world according to what it has to offer us. And forcibly redirecting attention to things from which “we expect no new knowledge” would, furthermore, be to give up the experience of sensory pleasure. As Thomas Reid argues later in the century, “the constitution of man” is such that any “continuance of the same unvaried sensations or feelings” will fail to please: “he is made for action and progress, and cannot be happy without it.”

We cannot feel sensory delight in an object we know thoroughly: there must be something yet unfamiliar to excite our pleasure.

Priestley and Reid describe the delights of novelty with approbation, as indicating humans’ fitness for intellectual growth. This optimism becomes the keynote of many later accounts of perceptual decay. In Thomas Dick’s *The Philosophy of a Future State* (1829), for instance, which argues that humans are “capable of making a perpetual progress towards intellectual and moral perfection,” Dick appeals to our waning pleasure in objects as proof:

From the very constitution of the human mind, it appears, that in order to enjoy uninterrupted happiness, without satiety or disgust, it is requisite that new objects and new trains of thought be continually opening to view. A perpetual recurrence of the same objects and perceptions, however sublime in themselves, and however interesting and delightful they may have been felt at one period, cannot afford uninterrupted

---

gratification to minds endowed with capacious powers, and capable of ranging through
the depths of immensity.\(^{16}\)

Dick’s tone is unmistakably triumphant. Where a century earlier, the writer for *The Scots Magazine* had characterized our “loathing” for familiar toys as a “fickleness” necessary to intellectual development, here the same distaste for familiar things is recast in the grand terms of human destiny. We lose interest and delight in objects because our “capacious powers” require us to keep expanding our sensory domain; to settle down with “the same objects and perceptions” would be tragically to curtail our potential for greatness. The assumption here is that both the world and our powers to discover it are limitless. We can perceptually use objects up without any fear of running out of newer sources for sensible gratification.

We don’t need Dick’s unbridled optimism to see the benefits of a worldview in which humans are oriented towards novelty. Critics have justly celebrated the post-Enlightenment emphasis on curiosity’s role in human experience as annexing learning to pleasure and as liberating us from what is given to pursue what is unknown.\(^{17}\) But to look at curiosity’s effect on the mind through the lens of perceptual decay is to understand that it takes something away from us too: our ability to sensibly appreciate and enjoy what we know best. As we get to know the world around us, it recedes from our notice. It is as if a curtain, ever thickening, drops between us and it. Coleridge calls this the “film of familiarity”; Shelley describes it as a “veil” that shrouds the world or a “mist” that “obscures from us the wonder of our being.”\(^{18}\) Common nineteenth-century metaphors of perception encode this gradual obscuring: “keen” or “sharp” sensations “dull” or “blunt” with use; “fresh” sensations “decay” or grow “stale”; “brilliant” colors “dim” or “fade.”\(^{19}\) Since time


and use seem to wear the world down, we are sensibly borne away from the things we know and love, and cast out to seek further and stranger sources of sensible pleasure.

**Novelty and Aesthetic Life**

Thus far I have described how perceptual decay became important to concepts of intellectual life, beginning in early eighteenth-century empiricist theory of mind and spreading out from there to broader popular culture. I have argued that critical accounts of early modern curiosity overlook perception’s role in prompting the pursuit of new knowledge: while eighteenth-century writers defined curiosity as an appetite for new things, they understood this appetite as responding to an apparent using-up of objects as we become used to them. But what seemed good for intellectual acquisition—the rapid, expansive action of the mind in figuring out the world—created a problem for aesthetic experience, by intimating that a vivid perception of any given object will always be fleeting. This problem, I will argue, is first articulated in relation to aesthetic life by Edmund Burke, and it becomes a central preoccupation for later writers on aesthetics, including William Hazlitt, John Ruskin, and Walter Pater. These writers imagine aesthetic bliss to be at odds with familiar perception, and they differently struggle to establish the relation of aesthetic experience to novelty—to new, rare, or otherwise strange sensations.

Historians of aesthetic thought have described “novelty” as an eighteenth-century term, pointing to Joseph Addison’s 1712 account of “greatness,” “novelty,” and “beauty” as the three primary “pleasures of the imagination,” and to the influence of this account on later eighteenth-

---

8 (1823): 247–52; Joseph Appleton Barrett, “The Love of Novelty,” in *Literary Remains of Joseph Appleton Barrett and Emily Maria Barrett* (Boston: Munroe & Francis, 1837); E.L.L., “New Things,” *The English Woman’s Journal* 3, no. 37 (1859): 245–51; Robert Bulgin, “Novelty,” in *The Photographic Journal*, 1868. The idea of perception as diminishing with repetition continues within current-day neuroscience, under the name of “habituation.” Research on habituation tends (like much contemporary science of mind) to focus on behavioral effects—on how a decreased response to a given stimulus helps animals adapt to stressful environments, or on how the need for an increased stimulus to provoke the same response shapes addictive behavior, for instance. By contrast, nineteenth-century writers on habituation were above all concerned with its phenomenology—with how it felt, on the inside, to have the world seem to fall away.
century aesthetic writers including Alexander Gerard, Lord Kames, and Archibald Alison.\textsuperscript{20} Ronald Paulson for instance identifies novelty as part of an eighteenth-century “heterodox” aesthetic that values curiosity, playfulness, and the pursuit of knowledge, and argues that Addison’s concept of novelty eventually mutates, through William Hogarth’s work, into an early version of the picturesque. Yet to run novelty into the picturesque is to lose what is distinctive about the former concept. The picturesque is essentially a visual aesthetic, found in a scene marked by variety and contrast. Novelty is \textit{temporal}: it intimates that our perceptual experience of the same thing changes from one moment to the next, and it orients us to an unknown future.\textsuperscript{21}

But more importantly, to treat novelty as significant only in early eighteenth-century aesthetics and as petering out shortly thereafter, is to miss altogether its central place in the history of aesthetic thought. It is true that Addison’s account of novelty, and the accounts of others shortly after his, play a key role in eighteenth-century debates over whether aesthetic properties are subjective or objective: if newness, which is essentially relative, is necessary to aesthetic perception, then aesthetic qualities cannot be described in fully objective terms. But the real problem that the pleasure of novelty poses for aesthetic experience is only first formulated by Burke in \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry}, and the problem he formulates persists in aesthetic discourse well into the mid-Victorian age. This is what Burke realizes in writing the \textit{Enquiry}: we cannot vividly perceive the aesthetic objects which we intimately know. If becoming familiar with an object erodes a keen awareness of its sensory properties, then we cannot be sensibly moved by anything we can accurately judge. Powerful sensation and precise knowledge—both of which would seem to be important to aesthetic


\textsuperscript{21}The two aesthetics also involve different modes of attention: while the consumer of the picturesque has a the-more-the-merrier attitude in which each additional object adds welcome contrast or variety to a scene, the novelty-hunter is more of a serial monogamist, focusing intently and exclusively on a new object only to move on when something newer appears. Ronald Paulson, \textit{The Beautiful, Novel, and Strange: Aesthetics and Heterodoxy} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Julie Park attends to novelty’s link to futurity in arguing that novel commodities (including the novel) in the eighteenth century enticed consumers to imagine a different, happier future. In purchasing new things, consumers were buying into their own transformation into new and improved people; consumption became a form of self-commodification, trading in a less-exciting present self for an imagined future self. Julie Park, \textit{The Self and It: Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
experience— are at odds. Burke answers this problem in the *Enquiry* by simply endorsing knowledge rather than sensation. (As I will argue later in the chapter, he comes up with a different, more interesting answer in his later writings on the French Revolution.) But the problem he articulates, in which aesthetic knowledge erodes vivid perception, has a life far beyond his essay: perceptual decay becomes a central topic in nineteenth-century aesthetics. In this section, moving through and then temporarily beyond Burke, I will canvass a few later discussions of perceptual decay in order to sketch its far-reaching implications for nineteenth-century art. I will then return to what I argue is Burke’s real, deeply provocative answer to his early problem, only suggested in his later response to the Revolution.

Burke opens his 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry* with a section on “Novelty” in which he argues that our pleasure in newness is too fleeting to allow for sustained aesthetic engagement.\(^2\) Citing the prominence that Burke gives to novelty by discussing it first, David Bromwich argues that he is uniquely receptive among contemporary writers to the role curiosity plays in determining pleasure. But if Burke recognizes the importance of curiosity he is all the more eager to sideline it as a distraction from systematic aesthetic inquiry. In focusing on the beautiful and the sublime he deliberately departs from the precedent set by Addison, who treats novelty on a par with beauty and greatness. Burke deftly admits curiosity’s power (it is “the first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind,” and “it has an appetite which is very sharp”) while deflecting that power from aesthetic feeling (29). Since novelty quickly wears off and “cannot attach us for

---

\(^2\) Critics agree in reading a tension in the *Enquiry* between a stable, universal standard of taste and the instability of individual preference. At one end of the spectrum is Terry Eagleton, who argues that the role of custom in Burke’s essay legitimates “a new kind of spontaneous consensus among social subjects, one whose locus is ... the realm of ‘culture’ itself” (55). In the middle are Frances Ferguson, who criticizes Burke for “violating” his own empiricism by forcing his theory of aesthetics towards “a common, universal faculty of taste” instead of responding to the individuality of personal experience, and Denise Gigante, who sees Burke struggling to establish human physiology as a stable locus of even as he acknowledges the body’s potentially wayward pleasures. At the other end is David Bromwich, who argues that Burke is radically attentive to strange and individual pleasures in the 1757 *Enquiry,* and that he retreats from this radical position in the 1759 Introduction on Taste. Terry Eagleton, “Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke,” *History Workshop Journal* 28, no. 1 (1989): 53–62; Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: from the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).
any length of time” to objects, and since curiosity “soon exhausts the variety which is commonly to be met with in nature,” it simply cannot provide a stable basis for an aesthetic relation to objects. Burke concludes by placing novelty almost entirely to the side of aesthetic value, turning his attention instead to the “many things” that are “adapted to affect the mind by means of other powers besides novelty in them, and of other passions besides curiosity in ourselves” (29). Aesthetic feelings may need some novel edge to them, he admits, but this is by no means their most interesting or significant feature. This curt dismissal of novelty is Burke’s attempt to salvage some objective aesthetic ground on which to proceed for the rest of the Enquiry.

In the Introduction on Taste which he prefaces to the 1759 edition of the Enquiry, Burke tackles more directly the problem that perceptual decay creates for aesthetic knowledge. Empiricist theory of mind describes a strange paradox in which sensation, which leads to knowledge, is in turn depleted by that knowledge: what we don’t yet know we feel keenly, but what we know well we hardly feel at all. As the physiologist Marie François Xavier Bichat writes in 1800, “Habit acts in an inverse ratio upon these two things. The feeling is constantly blunted by it, whereas the judgment on the contrary owes to it its perfection. The more we look at an object, the less are we sensible of its painful or agreeable qualities and the better do we judge of all its attributes.”

Burke is the first writer to formulate this paradox clearly, and it is significant that his formulation occurs in an aesthetic context. While the erosion of sensibility by knowledge may be troubling within intellectual life, at least we get to keep what we know. For those interested in aesthetic life this is small consolation: what is aesthetic experience without vivid sense perceptions?

Burke’s solution to this problem is not to deny the ravages of perceptual decay, as we might expect, but rather to place proper aesthetic judgment on the far side of those ravages where objects have already lost most of their sensible sharpness. He gives a developmental account of perceptual decay, contrasting the heady sensory pleasures of early life with the sober assessments of mature age: “In the morning of our days, when the senses are unworn and tender, when the whole man is

---

23 Xavier Bichat, Physiological Researches Upon Life and Death, trans. Tobias Watkins (Smith & Maxwell, 1809), 34.

13
awake in every part, and the gloss of novelty fresh upon all the objects that surround us, how lively at that time are our sensations, but how false and inaccurate the judgments we form of things” (24)? Impressions are most powerful when they first strike us, when we don’t know anything about them and have little to judge them by. By the same token our judgment becomes accurate only after we have tested it against a variety of sensations, but at this point our senses are no longer “unworn and tender,” and consequently we can’t feel things as keenly as we once did. In the movement from vivid sensation to judgment the Enquiry comes down heavily on the side of judgment, even as Burke ruefully admits that it is more likely to “throw … stumbling blocks in the way of the imagination” than to further its pleasures. Instead of a primary delight in objects for themselves, he leaves us with a cooler secondary approval of our own correctness, which he describes as “an indirect pleasure, a pleasure which does not immediately result from the object which is under contemplation” (24). What is new to us offers us the ecstasy of breaking free from the strictures of convention, but that ecstasy wears off too quickly to allow for a sustained engagement with with the world, and it veers dangerously from accurate thinking.

The dilemma Burke explores, in which knowledge dulls sensation, appears in accounts of aesthetic experience well into the nineteenth century. I sketch some of these here, as revealing the far-reaching ramifications of the idea of perceptual decay for aesthetic thought, and as providing some aesthetic context for my later chapters. William Hazlitt, in an essay titled “On Novelty and Familiarity” (1826), argues that “habitual and critical discernment” enables art critics to mark beauty more precisely than the novice, but strips us of the power to enjoy that beauty by “breed[ing] an indifference for those objects we are most conversant with and most masters of.”24 Since we only feel pleasure in proportion to the “clear gain” in knowledge that an object gives us, the expert’s emotional recourse is ever dwindling:

No doubt, that with the opening of every new inlet of ideas, there is unfolded a new source of pleasure; but this does not last much longer than the first discovery we make

of this *terra incognita*; and with the closing-up of every avenue of novelty, of curiosity, and of mystery, there is an end also of our transport, our wonder, and our delight; or it is converted into a very sober, rational, and household sort of satisfaction. (244)

Transport, ecstasy, rapture: all these measure the delight of being *moved* somewhere beyond familiar contexts. “Pleasure never is at home,” Keats had written eight years earlier, and Hazlitt’s essay agrees that we can’t settle down if we want to feel aesthetic bliss. Nevertheless, since only so many *terrae incognitae* can be found, he concludes that eventually we must settle whether we like it or not. Gradually we trade in “imagination,” or “the anticipation of unknown good” that excites us when new inlets open, for “affection,” which attaches us to the “habitual impression” of old, faded pleasures (274). Hazlitt describes a trajectory for aesthetic life in which we follow, albeit reluctantly, the path laid down by Burke: early “transport” gradually slows into a habitual, “household satisfaction” where we live out our days among objects that fail to move us any more.

Writing much later in the century, John Ruskin has a very different response to the problem of perceptual decay. Where Hazlitt sees only so many inlets that can open to open person, Ruskin celebrates nature’s infinitude as supplying endless sources of fresh enjoyment. But while we may travel without fear of running out of new things to transport us, Ruskin’s concern is to keep us from certain scenes that we might perceptually harm. That is, while Hazlitt worries about what familiarity does to *us* in ending our pleasures, Ruskin strangely worries about what familiarity will do to the *world*. He proclaims a doctrine of natural protection, in which certain scenes must be left untouched by any perceptions that would mar them: “The noblest scenes of the earth can be seen and known but by few; it is not intended that man should live always in the midst of them, he injures them by his presence, he ceases to feel them if he be always with them.”

---

25Keats, “Fancy.” In *John Keats, Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats* (Modern Library, 2001). Hazlitt’s account of pleasure as found in “clear gain” anticipates later economic attention to marginal utility. Catherine Gallagher has described how marginal utilitarians’ law of diminishing returns affected late nineteenth-century literature, arguing that Victorian writers felt a need to produce new or different outputs in order to keep up readers’ pleasure. Hazlitt’s essay, however, and writers on perceptual decay more generally, show an awareness of pleasure’s diminishment well before the rise of marginal utility theory. Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

that to become insensible to the natural world would be to commit a crime, to injure what we no longer feel. His curious use of this word, with its etymological link to judgment, contradicts Burke’s claim that we can judge aright without feeling keenly, even as Ruskin doesn’t get away from the original problem of knowledge eroding sensation; for him, the possibility of falling into insensitivity means that we must avoid spending too much time with any one thing, rather relying on “the continual discovery, of new ignorance, continual self-abasement, continual astonishment” to be found through walking over the face of ever-changing nature, or through moving through the various fresh perspectives on nature offered by great art.27 Lingering too long with a single scene can threaten it, by wearing away its sharp clarity in our minds.

I’ve briefly tracked a concern over how knowledge lessens sensibility through what we might consider the “higher” regions of nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse; but this concern is similarly evident in the plains and valleys of popular media, in which writers looked to art—and especially to popular literature, which was relatively cheap and accessible—to quicken jaded sensibilities. Reading, unlike looking at one of Ruskin’s paintings or going straight to nature itself, could only provide sensations indirectly, but even so nineteenth-century writers overwhelmingly discussed literature in sensational terms. The novel might be understood as a technology designed around perceptual decay, meant to pique readers’ curiosity and then to release them to move on to another production. Thus one of the main ways that the novel lives up to its name is in the mode of reading that it encourages: the novel is “new” because we are always picking up another one.28

A 1847 article in Fraser’s Magazine on “Aspects of Contemporary Literature” illustrates novels’

[Notes]

Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903).


28 As historians of the nineteenth-century shift from “intensive” to “extensive” reading have pointed out, novel-readers easily finished one book or installment to take up another. See William St. Clair and David Kurnick on this shift. Contemporary observers analyzed extensive reading not as a matter of socioeconomic changes, as critics do today, but as the result of a growing consumer appetite for novelty. Describing how “the demand for new publications is extensive beyond any precedent,” a letter published in the India Gazette in 1790 puts this demand down to “an insatiable curiosity, an appetite for novelty, for what is new, at least in appearance, and singular, at least in it’s [sic] manner.” William St. Clair, The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); David Kurnick, “An Erotics of Detachment: Middlemarch and Novel Reading as Critical Practice,” English Literary History 74, no. 3 (2007): 583–608; Anon., “To the Editor of the India Gazette,” India Gazette, May 1790.
seeming ephemerality in describing them as “pictures of every-day life, which for a moment glitter before the fatigued eye and pass away.” The writer’s tone, as in many contemporary accounts of novel reading, is dismissive. But the same “glittering” could be read as characterizing forms that do not try forcibly to hold readers’ attention against its natural abating. Novels are written in recognition that nothing new can stay—that pleasure is always fleeting, always on the run.

This recognition is encoded not just in the mode of reading that nineteenth-century novels invite, but in their topical preference for initial experience. Biased toward characters’ “first time” experiences, nineteenth-century novels gave readers the vicarious thrill of seeing aspects of everyday life as if they were wholly new. As William Makepeace Thackeray writes in *The History of Pendennis* (1849), “Though the after drink, as we mechanically go on repeating it, is stale and bitter, how pure and brilliant was that first sparkling draught of pleasure!” Through representing characters tasting “that first sparkling draught,” novels prompt readers to forget their own satiated palate and to reimagine the world as fresh. An 1870 article in *The Cornhill Magazine* explains the pleasure found in reading novels in perceptual terms: “Under their enchantment we can for a few moments see the world, as though we had just dropped from another planet, and everything had the charm of complete newness.” Defamiliarization is a common tactic of defence against perceptual decay, tricking the mind into paying attention to old things as if they were new. But this transfiguration of the world into “another planet” offers no lasting solution; the giveaway phrase above, “for a few moments,” shows just how essentially temporary the power will be of any artwork that depends on perceptual estrangement for its effort. Like Wordsworth spinning around as a child and stopping short to make “the solitary cliffs / Wheel[ ] by,” we might feel what Rei Terada describes as a phenomenophiliac thrill in the transient disturbance of what we know, but soon enough the world will set to rights again.

---

32Wordsworth, 1805 *Prelude*, Book 1, ll. 484–5. Terada argues that phenomenophilia, in which we attend to spectral, fleeting, hallucinatory or other non-factive phenomena, gives us a temporary reprieve from a coerced consent to
Thus, in the glancing survey I’ve taken, we glimpse nineteenth-century aesthetics as a field shaped around vivid experience, in which vividness depends on unfamiliarity. Early in the century, the physiologist François Magendie writes of “the existence of man being, as it were, measured out by the vivacity of his sensations”; but if philosophers theorized about counting life by feelings, literary writers and other artists put this measuring into practice. In Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), Lionel Verney, who is left alone on earth after the supposed death by plague of all other humankind, affirms the central value of human experience when he sets out in Shelley’s final paragraph to taste and see the world as if it is wholly new: “I shall witness all the variety of appearance, that the elements can assume—I shall read fair augury in the rainbow—menace in the cloud—some lesson or record dear to my heart in everything.” And yet as Verney himself (whose name announces his eternal spring greenness) proclaims only a few pages earlier, his “lesson” is “yet unstudied,” “so that every new impression of the hard-cut reality on my soul brought with it a fresh pang” (362). Only by carefully policing a state of enforced innocence can Verney continue to present a blank page to be written on anew. Verney’s posture of heroic discovery finds a surprising counterpart in Walter Pater’s Conclusion to the *Renaissance*, in which Pater advocates divorcing habitual associations and severing narrative ligatures in order to begin a life of “for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions”: “To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.” Shelley’s Verney at the bedrock of existence,


33Francois Magendie, *An Elementary Treatise on Human Physiology*, trans. John Revere (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), 123. Georges Poulet describes the eighteenth-century idea of life as upheld by sensation: “Since nothingness is pure insensibility, to escape nothingness means to be aware of one’s own sensations. The more intense they are the more one will feel his present existence; and the more numerous they are the more one will sense a duration in his existence.” Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*, trans. Elliott Coleman (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 20–1.


Pater at its pinnacle—these bedfellows, strange in more ways than one, both celebrate human life essentially in its capacity to feel vivid sensations even at the cost of intimate knowledge and habitual affection. They evoke the paradoxical fantasy at the heart of nineteenth-century aesthetic desire: to see everything, always, for the very first time.

**Edmund Burke and the French Revolution**

Burke’s response to the French Revolution takes issue with precisely this kind of thinking, with a nescience wilfully maintained in the service of experiencing something new. In response to the revolutionary emphasis on political innovation, he articulates a conservative politics in which culture’s value comes from its providing continuity to human creatures who else would “be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality.”

Couched within Burke’s political polemic, I read a secondary aesthetic polemic. This aesthetic polemic provides a different answer to the problem he had raised in the *Enquiry*, and sketches a framework of aesthetic conservation that will clarify the stakes of my later chapters. Burke advances the aesthetic value of habitual attachment to worn-down objects; in contrast to the vehement delights of novelty, his writings on the Revolution draw out a sustained if attenuated pleasure found in feeling what we know best. Thus they gesture at a new mode of aesthetic experience: one sensitive to the heft of what goes almost unnoticed in habitual perception, and aware of the slighter pressures of temporal continuity amidst the more forceful insistence of change. To find this mode I necessarily read between the lines of Burke’s overt project to convince his readers of the dangers of revolution: my issue is not with the validity or invalidity of his political claims but rather with their rhetorical framing, which bears significantly on ideas of perceptual decay.

Burke’s late-career solution to the problem of perceptual decay is different than the one

---

2010), 120.  
36Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96. All parenthetical citations in this section, unless otherwise noted, are to the *Reflections*.  

---

19
he arrives at in the *Enquiry*. There, as we have seen, he asserted the aesthetic value of accurate judgment over lively sensation. But in his writings on the Revolution, although he still praises the judgment of the experienced statesman, Burke counter-intuitively contests the territory not of judgment but of *pleasure*. He displays indignation at all that goes unnoticed from a perspective that privileges novelty. The political structures hard won from anarchy, the vast reserves of accumulated cultural knowledge, the multitudinous objects with which we habitually interact: Burke is livid that all of these resources might be passed over in the name of speculating on unknown opportunities of delight. Critical of a short-shrift affective economy in which acquisition of new things is (paradoxically) worth more than possession of old, he posits an auxiliary role for the imagination in reflecting back on and finding pleasure in what is familiar. The aesthetic becomes a form of experience in which old, well-known perceptions are kept alive.

The *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) refuses the revolutionary language of equality and liberty and rhetorically reframes the revolutionary fervor as a passion for *novelty*. Others have read the *Reflections* in relation to Burke’s early discussion of the beautiful and the sublime, but his real concern is not with these but rather with the brushed-aside topic of that first, early page in the *Enquiry*, curiosity. By the *Reflections* this once trivial passion has become a combustible and unpredictable force. Possessed by the “spirit of innovation,” the revolutionaries and their supporters in Britain are determined to “make every thing new”: “new power in new persons,” the “new institute of the rights of man,” the “new conquering empire of light and reason,” “new equity and its new morality,” “new nomenclature,” the “new experimental government,” “new

---

37 No one has read Burke’s *Reflections* directly in light of contemporary discussions of novelty. David Bromwich comes closest in briefly noting the ironic disparity between what he reads as Burke’s affirmation of curiosity in the *Enquiry* and his discomfort with the same in the *Reflections*. In contrast, many critics have discussed Burke’s writings on the Revolution in relation to his earlier accounts of the sublime or the beautiful. Ronald Paulson argues that for Burke “the true sublime in government” should produce feelings as toward a father, “a mixture of fear and awe or admiration,” and that the French Revolution portrays rather the “false sublime,” a “grotesque energy” released by the unholy destruction and usurpation of the father (249). Terry Eagleton describes Burke’s ideal state as balancing beautiful blandishments with sublime authority. Ronald Paulson, “Burke’s Sublime and the Representation of Revolution,” in *Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment*, ed. Perez Zagorin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 241–70; Eagleton, “Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke”; Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*. 
principles of order,” and so on. 38 (“New” is the Reflections’ second-most used adjective, after “great.”)

What Burke gains by this rhetorical framing is an adroit positioning of the desire for revolution as simultaneously childish and threatening. In the Enquiry curiosity is both fundamental and frivolous: it is “the first and simplest emotion … in the human mind,” our chief feeling “when the whole man is awake in every part,” but it is also “the most superficial of all the affections,” having “always an appearance of giddiness” (24). Burke uses this early double characterization to make his later rhetorical maneuvers; similarly, he draws on the intense but quickly used-up attention of the curious child in the Enquiry to paint his later picture of the eager but endlessly distracted revolutionaries.

Recognizing Burke’s rhetorical appeal to novelty can recast our critical sense of his attack on a rationalist politics based on first principles. 39 Novelty is only new in relation to something; it cannot exist in pure abstraction. Thus Burke’s tarring of the revolutionaries with the brush of curiosity cleverly implicates them in a context which they are at pains to deny. Burke’s claim is that abstract metaphysical reasoning depends on a defiantly naive orientation towards the world. The revolutionaries are like Lionel Verneys, intent on learning things but only through first forgetting what they already know. Burke criticizes those who “chose to act as if [they] had never been moulded into civil society, and had every thing to begin anew” as making a fundamental category mistake, confusing the process of individual intellectual development with cultural progress at large (36). In a glancing reference to Locke’s “white paper” he writes, “I cannot conceive how any man can have brought himself to that pitch of presumption to consider his country as nothing but carte blanche—upon which he may scribble whatever he pleases” (157). The revolutionaries, that is, have the misguided idea that they can rewrite society from scratch just as a baby starts out with the world as a blank slate and has to fill it up herself. This helps explain why Burke portrays the as-yet moderate Revolution (in 1790 France was only on the point of becoming a constitutional

---

38 Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, 33, 248, 9, 77, 114, 149, 165, 209, emphasis in original.
monarchy) as a total upending of society: from his perspective, to imagine alternatives to the given political structure, as the National Assembly was doing, is like mentally destroying it. In Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791), written in response to the *Reflections*, Paine expresses the kind of position that Burke criticizes in arguing that since “all men are born equal,” “consequently every child born into the world must be considered as deriving its existence from God. The world is as new to him as it was to the first man that existed, and his natural right in it is of the same kind.”

Equality, in this figure, manifests in a certain relation to the world in which we can begin as if from the beginning, without having to answer to the constraints of the past. Burke would characterize this as denialism: we should not act as if nothing has come before us because it’s simply not true.

Thus Burke’s target is not abstraction, simply, but rather abstraction recharacterized as a wilful rescinding of adult experience in order to return to a state of childish ignorance. Part of what is at issue here is the question of how best to perceive the world. For Paine, pretending as if everything were new, taking nothing for granted, allows us to see corrupt institutions as they really are; for Burke novelty is a dazzling distraction from clear-headed judgment. The *Reflections* reprises the dichotomy between lively sensations and accurate judgment. The revolutionaries act out the *Enquiry*’s “morning of our days, when the senses are unworn and tender,” that early stage of vivid feeling but faulty judgment. Like infants, they are “wholly unacquainted with the world,” their “tender and susceptible imaginations” yet finely responsive to all new sensations (12, 193). By contrast, Burke takes on the part of the *Enquiry*’s “refined judge,” underlining his years of experience, describing his older, tougher mind as having grown resistant to the incursion of new sensations, and otherwise dramatically performing (in language from the *Reflections*) “the stiff and

---


41 See James Chandler on the distinction between Rousseauian and Burkean attitudes towards time. Those attached to Rousseau’s “nature” see time as essentially corrupting original innocence, while conservatives like Burke describe time’s effect as essentially hallowing. Chandler’s account mostly sidesteps the question of perception: while Burke may see time as improving what it touches from a moral perspective, he agrees with others that it inexorably diminishes our sensible awareness, and this is the problem that his response to the French Revolution must try and solve. James Chandler, *Wordsworth’s Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
The peremptory dignity of age.”

The revolutionaries’ real selling point, by his lights, is not so much the rights of man as it is a second childhood, a return to the early stage of feeling where everything is still new. Burke treats this with high disdain: who but a weak-minded person would want to trade in maturity so as to be a infant again?

These gentlemen deal in regeneration: but at any price I should hardly yield my rigid fibres [that, is the fibres of his old mind] to be regenerated by them; nor begin, in my grand climacteric, to squall in their new accents, or to stammer, in my second cradle, the elemental sounds of their barbarous metaphysics. *Si isti mihi largiuntur ut repuerascam, et in eorum cunis vagiam, valde recusem.*

Lively sensation, as pleasurable as Burke admits it to be, must be considered in relation to a larger context in which it is outweighed by the value of experience. We can see Burke, who is writing at a point when children are becoming increasingly central to the British cultural imagination, struggling to get his audience to let go of a fixation with early experiences and to adopt a self-consciously mature perspective. The most decisive and most important parts of life, he argues, are found not in youth but in old age.

But Burke goes even farther than the *Enquiry*’s assertion of the value of mature judgment over vivid sensation. In the *Reflections*’ praise of “prejudice,” Burke effectively short-circuits the intellectual movement from sensation to judgment described in his *Enquiry* and in other empiricist texts. This praise extends beyond the continuity established by prejudged political structures, to the continuity of a nation’s imaginative life at large. The greatness of “culture” for Burke is precisely that it allows us to prejudge the world, to bypass the process of learning everything afresh and so to

---

42p. 217. The contrast between youth and age is heightened when we remember that the *Reflections* began as a letter to “a very young gentleman at Paris” (3).

43Cicero: “If someone allowed me to return to boyhood, and to bawl in my cradle, I would emphatically refuse” (217).

44For two classic studies on the representation of childhood in art of this period, see George Boas on how in the nineteenth century the child became both a figure for the artist and a primary subject of art, and Peter Coveney on children in Romantic literature as emblematic of sensibility as opposed to rationality. In a recent article Theresa Mangum celebrates the field of age studies for exposing the normative bias towards early life in nineteenth-century British literature. George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood* (London: Warburg Institute, 1966); Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood; the Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967); Teresa Mangum, “Literary Tales of Late Life,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16, no. 1 (April 2011): 123–28.
avoid some of the pitfalls of passionate inaccuracy that go along with that process. Culture ideally does for the mind what the mind cannot do for itself—it supplies a mass of ready-made judgments to fill in the blankness that might allow us to experience the world as wholly new. Burke’s joy over this filling-in is what James Mill deprecates as his “admiration of the bare fact of existence,” and what Burke himself formidably describes as “the presumed consent of every rational creature … with the predisposed order of things.”

Culture allies us to the world as it exists now and as it has existed, and thus gives us a home in the “order of things.” It protects us from “the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction” (7). Thus of all the garments in his “wardrobe of a moral imagination” Burke prizes the “coat of prejudice” the most, and derides those who would cast this aside after so many centuries of hard work weaving just to feel the bare elements against their “naked shivering nature” (77, 87).

Burke may seem to demand too much in asking readers to take others’ say-so rather than to figure things out on their own. And yet if we credit his purported claims to moderation, we can read him as prescribing not a complete mental overturn but rather a shift in imaginative emphasis. Where others at the turn of the century pictured the imagination as “springing” or “launching” outward like an explorer venturing through new territories, Burke describes an

---


46While Burke’s argument may be for settled moderation, his language is anything but moderate or conventional: there is no more novel document on the French Revolution than Burke’s polemic against novelty. His verbal pyrotechnics give us a further sense of his own ambivalence towards the passion for novelty; he recognizes its powerful effect on the mind, something he tries to produce with his own style, even as he urges readers to develop resistance to novelty’s force. As others have noted, Burke’s *Reflections* can be read as a self-undermining document. See Anne Mallory, who argues that Burke’s boredom with the thought of a settled state leads him to create a histrionic style in compensation—what she calls “an alternative theater of boredom.” Katey Castellano argues that the divergence between Burke’s “conservative traditionalism” and his “shockingly new, experimental style” reveals his sense of the artifice involved in cobbling together an aesthetic version of a tradition that has already been lost. Thanks to Peter Manning and Susan Wolfson for pressing me on this issue of style. Anne Mallory, “Burke, Boredom, and the Theater of Counterrevolution,” *PMLA* 118, no. 2 (2003): 224–38; Katey Castellano, “Burke’s ‘Revolutionary Book’: Conservative Politics and Revolutionary Aesthetics in the Reflections,” *Romanticism on the Net* 45 (2007).
auxiliary role for the imagination in dawdling behind the vanguard of progress.\textsuperscript{47} If we naturally press towards the unknown future, as promising us the most excitement, Burke would have us artificially fall back into the recently-lapsed past. By developing imaginative habits more aligned with the cultural bias towards what has been done before, we may come to have a more nuanced engagement with the world around us, rather than giving most of our attention to a dazzling future. Rejecting a society which is “wholly obsolete” just as much as he disparages one that is “wholly new,” Burke nevertheless defers to obsolescence, a term he uses provocatively to indicate whatever is not immediately recent in time (34). Praising the legal “presumption against novelty” in \textit{Letters on a Regicide Peace}, he inculcates a similar partiality to “obsolete policy” and mentally locates himself in the recent past, declaring (again in relation to state policy), “I am in this year, 1796, only where all the powers of Europe were in 1793.”\textsuperscript{48} Burke leads by example in pointing a function for the imagination as a laggard, “old and slow” like Burke himself, lingering in the recent past and so prolonging it for a little while more. And he extends this imaginative characteristic to all true English: “Thanks to our sullen resistance to innovation, thanks to the cold sluggishness of our national character, we still bear the stamp of our forefathers” (86). “Stamp” calls up Locke’s rejection of any innate ideas being “stamped on the mind” before birth, and once again we can see Burke wishfully hoping that culture could perform what universal mental structure could not.

In developing the British imagination’s “sluggish” capacities, Burke adapts sensibility to what is barely perceptible. In \textit{Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs} (1791), Burke directly blames perceptual decay for causing disregard of a settled social state: “Our complexion is such, that we are palled with enjoyment, and stimulated with hope,—that we become less sensible to a long-possessed benefit from the very circumstance that it is become habitual.”\textsuperscript{49} Thus even as

\textsuperscript{47}For examples of these metaphors for imagination, see \textit{The European Magazine} on the “internal spring of imagination” and John Potter on the imagination as “extending” and “launching out after greater things.” Anon., “Oestrum Orphicum,” \textit{The European Magazine, and London Review}, 1790; John Potter, \textit{Observations on the Present State of Music and Musicians} (London: for C. Henderson, 1762), 27.

\textsuperscript{48}Edmund Burke, \textit{Thoughts on the Prospect of a Regicide Peace} (London, Printed for J. Owen, 1796), 80.

\textsuperscript{49}In \textit{The Works and Correspondence of Edmund Burke}, Vol 4, 404.
he protests in the *Reflections* that British liberty is “rather as a possession to be secured than as a prize to be contended for;” he is working against a new speculative economy of delight in which a “prize to be contended for” seems worth *more* than “a possession to be secured,” in that we pay it more regard when looking for pleasure (54). To counteract this Burke redirects attention to “less sensible” feelings. His imagery conveys the heaviness of things nevertheless almost imperceptible: the “dense medium” of “common life,” the “thousands of great cattle” silently munching, the “drapery” we wear as carelessly as our own skin, the “weight” of the “collected wisdom of ages.” In perhaps the most powerful image in this line, in which we can see Burke’s deft figural technique at work, he compares “manners” to “the air we breathe,” affecting us “by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation.”

Burke calls this operation “insensible,” underlining the difficulty of sensibly accessing whatever is “constant, steady, uniform.” And yet for all this, he provides us here with a *sensible* figure that brings manners (and “common life” more generally) just within perceptible range, by imagining something as quiet and intimate as listening to and feeling the air move around and within us. Recalling Burke’s claim about Britons’ liberty above, we can see his subtle reworking of the concept in his use of this essential icon for freedom. If the poet Charles Churchill writes in *The Ghost* (1763) of the poetic muse as being “free as the air, and unconfin’d,” “dart[ing] from place to place” in imperial frenzy, Burke reimagines air not as a substance swiftly moving or easily traversed, but as something silently brooding all about us. Finding pleasure in what we know too well to notice will not be easy, but it is just barely possible, like developing an aesthetics of the sound of respiration.

We might give pause over why this should be an *aesthetic* experience, particularly, although we would probably not hesitate to count as aesthetic Wordsworth’s “gentle breeze,” or Shelley’s West Wind, or, much later in the nineteenth century, Whitman’s “respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs.” Burke’s figure is not

---

50 *Thoughts on the Prospect of a Regicide Peace*, 38–9.
so different from these. It is a sensible image, momentarily heeded for its own sake (even if, like Wordsworth’s or Shelley’s wind, it figures forth a more abstract concept), from which we derive a feeling of pleasure. Thus the *Reflections* and Burke’s contemporary letters expand the purview of the imagination, developing a culture of feeling for what is barely perceptible despite being always to hand.

Burke’s attention to the weight of what we barely notice is prescient when considered in relation to developing theories of sensation. At the turn of the century it was common for philosophers to define “sensation” as the consciousness of change, implying the impossibility of feeling anything that constantly affects us. Only a few decades before Burke’s *Reflections* had physiologists like Robert Whytt begun to seriously challenge this idea, and it was not until the nineteenth century that writers from Erasmus Darwin onward reconsidered consciousness as shaped by sensations that only minimally strike our notice.\(^5\) In lectures given at the University of Edinburgh in 1806–9 Thomas Brown describes a welter of sensations ebbing and flowing in perceptual experience:

> A thousand faint sounds murmur around us, which are instantly hushed by any loud noise. If, when we are looking at the glittering firmament of suns in a winter night, any one of those distant orbs were to become as radiant as our own sun, which is itself but the star of our planetary system, there can be no question, that, like our sun on its rising, it would quench, with its brilliancy, all those little glimmering lights, which would still shine on us, indeed, as before, but would shine on us without being perceived. (*Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 481)

Brown pictures a world of sensation flowing around us and pressing in at the edges of our intent.

\(^5\)See for instance Robert Bentley Todd’s definition of “sensation” in the *Cyclopaedia of Anatomy and Physiology* as “the perception by the mind of a change wrought in the body.” After Whytt and Darwin, later psychological physiologists (including Alexander Bain, William Carpenter, George Henry Lewes, and Herbert Spencer) challenged both the idea that having a sensation involves a conscious perception of it, and that sensation only arises with a change of state. These writers argued that we may experience a number of sensations—and even respond to them, through automatic behaviors—without our being aware of it. See Vanessa Ryan for an account of the impact of theories of “unconscious cerebration” and reflex action on mid-to-late Victorian novels. Robert Bentley Todd, ed., “Sensation,” in *The Cyclopaedia of Anatomy and Physiology*, vol. 4 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1835–1859); Robert Whytt, *An Essay on the Vital and Other Involuntary Motions of Animals* (Edinburgh: Hamilton, Balfour, & Neill, 1751); Vanessa Ryan, *Thinking Without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).
awareness to whatever is “brilliant” or “loud.” In times of intensity these things may not directly
strike our notice—like the “little glimmering lights” of the stars, they may be momentarily lost
amidst stronger impressions—but they affect us nonetheless. Burke, in his images of quietness, of
dense atmospheres, of clothing draped over our bodies, notes a similar register of feelings on the
borders of consciousness and tries to recover those feelings for aesthetic pleasure.

**Burke and Narrating Conservation**

Burke’s interest in finding pleasure in things that endure around us not only makes possible a new
mode of aesthetic engagement; it also adumbrates a possibility of reshaping narrative form around
continuity rather than change. This remains only a faint suggestion. Burke’s most famous narrative
episode is the purple passage which tells of Marie Antoinette fleeing her bedroom. But flitting
around the emotional tragicomedy of the French Revolution as Burke tells it through various letters
and speeches, is a ghost narrative about the Glorious Revolution of 1688—a revolution whose
main glory for Burke is that it hardly revolved anything at all. This is what could have been for
France, and what Burke hopes will continue to be for England:

> The nation kept the same ranks, the same orders, the same privileges, the same
> franchises, the same rules for property, the same subordinations, the same order in the
> law, in the revenue, and in the magistracy,—the same lords, the same commons, the
> same corporations, the same electors.\(^{53}\)

Relating someone doing the same thing day after day doesn’t make for a very interesting story,
but it is in precisely this kind of narrative, Burke intimates, that the pleasure in enduring forms
can be found. Where most turn-of-the-century narratives follow significant change—what Carlyle
describes in his own history of the French Revolution as a “solution of continuity” and what Richard

---

Price unfortunately praises in his sermon as “an eventful period”—Burke reframes continuity as an action in its own right rather than as the absence of action.54

Burke’s story of “the same,” “the same,” “the same” offers a narrative satisfaction distinct from the pleasures of anticipation and discovery woven into the contemporary novel. Peter Brooks has described plot as “a deviance from or transgression of the normal, a state of abnormality and error, which alone is ‘narratable.’ ”55 Burke shows himself aware of a similar mazy motion when describing the Constitutional Committee’s reversals in a letter written in 1791: “Had I followed all these changes, my letter would have been only a gazette of their wanderings, a journal of their march from error to error, through a dry, dreary desert, unguided by the lights of Heaven, or by the contrivance which wisdom has invented to supply their place.”56 This unwritten “gazette” could have told the plot of any number of contemporary novels—say, Fanny Burney’s Camilla (1796), which follows the heroine blundering from alarm to confusion and back again. But Burke’s language of “contrivance” signals the possibility of a narrative design less prone to error, framed around the “wisdom” of following earlier patterns (which themselves mirror divine guidance) rather than trying to make one’s own way in the world.57 In the Reflections this wisdom works apart from conscious knowledge; Burke describes it as “the happy effect of following nature,” a kind of sluggish inertia that continues the past into the future (33). This describes a fundamentally different orientation to temporal unfolding than the one that the deviant plot offers to the reader. The reader of deviance is kept alert, curiously anticipating new discoveries that will lead her far from what she already knows. With each new twist in plot she scraps much of what has


56 “A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly,” in The Works and Correspondence of Edmund Burke Vol 4, 360.

57 A writer sends a complaint to The Times in 1786 which resembles Burke’s own in the Reflections: “We live in an age of improvement: the conduct of a father, is no longer a pattern for the son: the abilities, the taste, and even the merit of the latter, is in general ascertained by a deviation from the manners and habits of the former” (emphasis mine). Anon., “On Puffing,” The Times, December 1786, 2.
come before—the previous feints at false resolutions—and speculates on new results based on her uncertain present knowledge. The result is a form of excess, a “large loose baggy monster” shaped by both the unlikely flourishes taken simply to get from point $A$ to point $B$ and the reader’s manifold guesses revised and reconsidered, with all of these filling up the ballooning significations that literary critics like to find in texts.\textsuperscript{58} By contrast Burke imagines a relation to the future along the lines of providence, which understands the course of futurity as already intimated by the course of the past and which emphasizes thrifty management in habitually conserving past knowledge and transmitting it forward.\textsuperscript{59}

In attending to Burke’s meager narrative means and to his imagined enjoyment in worn-down perception, I have sketched out a conservative project of aesthetic sustainability. Rather than seeking out new sensations for pleasure—or relying on the transient effect of defamiliarizing old ones—Burke offers a quieter delight in staying with what we already know. Critiques of this project come all too easily to hand. Burke’s desire to minimize the role of free choice by assuming a “presumed consent … with the predisposed order of things” is inseparable from a politics of the status quo, and anyway seems obtuse at a time when aesthetic experience increasingly marked the divergent twists of individual taste rather than a forced consent to social norms. I’m not sure that these objections can be fully answered. But Burke nevertheless touches on real problems with his concern to mitigate a process in which knowledge diminishes feeling and with his unwillingness to maximize pleasure at the cost of mentally discarding objects whenever they begin to wear. Writing against the excess generated by a mindset always willing to throw things out and begin from scratch, Burke is tantalized by the thought of a minimal satisfaction in which feeling is fitted


\textsuperscript{59}Burke’s narrative attention to continuity over time closely resembles Anne-Lise François’s “recessive action,” her moments of narrative slightness which by neither moving the plot forward nor asking for labored interpretation resist an arc of “demonstrable, dramatic development.” While Burke, unlike François, is eager to testify to the importance of what is hardly noticed, his desire to make do with available materials rather than swapping them out for newer or better looks much like her claim to minimal contentment as being sometimes contentment enough. Anne-Lise François, \textit{Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), xvi.
to what is in reach rather than found by grasping for more. Curiosity’s sharp appetite “changes its object perpetually,” he writes in the *Enquiry*, indirectly calling up the new consumer culture that Julie Park and other have described in eighteenth-century Britain; in cultivating slighter pleasures the *Reflections* re-envisions a world in which we can stay imaginatively attached to objects that endure and continue to shape us whether we notice them or not. Katey Castellano has recently traced the influence of Burke’s conservative ideas on a later emphasis on ecological conservation. With this lineage in mind, we can read Burke’s emphasis on heeding and enjoying what is obsolete as pertinent to an era of ecological apocalypse in which we have realized that just because things wear out and offer us little further pleasure, they don’t necessarily go away. What is discarded, cast out of mind and out of sight (for many of us fortunate enough to live in a “developed” country at least), nevertheless remains whether we know it anymore or not—the microbeads in the oceans, the plastic trinkets piling up in landfills, the exhaust from our business or leisure trips filtering through the atmosphere. As Burke claims in the *Reflections*, the apparent purity offered by a new beginning—which, as Park argues, is essentially what new commodities promise us—in fact involves a lot of gratuitous waste.

---

60 Burke’s minimal satisfaction is interesting to consider in light of Marshall Sahlins’s provocative claim that hunter-gatherers, whom a long critical history had portrayed as resource-strapped, were in fact the “original affluent society.” As Sahlins writes, “there are two possible courses to affluence. Wants may be ‘easily satisfied’ either by producing much or desiring little” (5). Sahlins contrasts this with the counterintuitive scarcity of market-industrial society, where “in this game of consumer free choice, every acquisition is simultaneously a deprivation, for every purchase of something is a foregoing of something else, in general only marginally less desirable, and in some particulars more desirable, that could have been had instead” (8). Marshall Sahlins, “The Original Affluent Society,” in *Limited Wants, Unlimited Means: A Reader on Hunter-Gatherer Economics and the Environment*, ed. John Gowdy (Island Press, 1997), 5–41.

After Burke

In this chapter I have described how and why the mind became dependent on novelty for its pleasures; I have explored the significance of this dependence for late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century aesthetic thought; and I have argued that Burke, even as he acknowledges the mind’s bent towards the new, prescribes a role for culture in compensating for this bent and tries to turn the imagination to culture’s ends. Evoking a pleasure derived from staying with what we know rather than seeking out what is new, Burke sketches out a provisional aesthetics of continuity. I trace this conservative aesthetic mode through the works of three nineteenth-century literary writers: Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Eliot. Each of these writers considered their works as experiments in perception, and I follow how they differently shape aesthetic experience around familiar perceptions that have decayed through use. Where Burke only gestures to the possibility of a narrative of attachment, which follows continuity rather than difference over time, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Eliot each actually write such a narrative. Stripping away the anticipatory frameworks that keep narratives pointed towards future development, they imagine what pleasures can be found without the charm of novelty to entice us on.

My first chapter, “Wordsworth’s Feeling for the Insensible,” explores a conflict between two different temporal modes in Wordsworth’s early poetry: the singular “spots of time” first formulated in the 1799 two-part Prelude, and an iterative “day to day” temporality, most clearly present in the 1800 poem “Michael.” Wordsworth develops the spots of time in order to hold on to the fading forms of the past: they have a “renovating” (or “fructifying”) power to restore what has withered or decayed. But they gain this power at a cost. Encouraging the “tyranny of the eye” that Wordsworth elsewhere disclaims, the spots of time usurp prominence amidst other less notable moments, wrenching the fabric of lived experience and compelling the observer’s attention. We can see Wordsworth’s ambivalence over this conception of dense nodes of meaningful experience in his development of a distinctly un-spotty temporality in “Michael.” Michael, rather than treating his past feelings as portable property which he can put toward future emotional profit, accepts their
inevitable decline and embraces what little is left to him: “the pleasure which there is in life itself.”
I read the sheepfold, which others have seen as a site of deep significance, as rather Wordsworth’s work in progress towards an aesthetic object with minimal meaning.

My second chapter, “How to Exist Where You Are: A Lesson in Lotos-Eating,” takes up Tennyson’s early efforts to counter the imagination’s imperialistic, roaming tendencies. I challenge critical accounts of Tennyson’s “imperialistic imagination,” arguing that Tennyson appeals to Orientalist tropes in an attempt to think his way out of the psychology of empire: he foils plots of imaginative expansion and conquest rather than furthering them. I read a set of 1830–32 poems, most notably “The Lotos-Eaters,” as articulating a subversive pleasure in slight sensations that resists the pressure to heighten or diversify experience. Tennyson has been read as a teleologically-minded poet writing towards and against his own doom, but I discover a narrative mode in his poetry which attends to time’s passing without anticipating its end. While the lotos-eating mariners resemble Michael in accepting mild pleasures and living without curiosity about the future, Michael’s is a hardscrabble existence scarred by grief and loss, and whatever pleasure the reader imagines he feels in the sheepfold he builds is found in the midst of exhaustion and loss rather than in despite of them. Breaking Wordsworth’s link between labor and pleasure, the mariners happily waste their time, and their obvious preference of leisure’s diminishing returns to productivity’s stockpiled excesses makes their minimal delight look much like luxury. I contrast this surprising path to decadence with later aestheticism’s emphasis on novelty and vivid perceptions.

In my third and final chapter, “‘Doomed to Live’: The Fate of Eliot’s Aesthetic Humanism,” I argue that Eliot places dimmed and faded sensations at the heart of aesthetic experience as a way of “making the world a home for dimmed and faded human beings.”62 In loving aesthetic objects as we would love other people despite their sensible decline, Eliot hopes her readers will strengthen a habit of feeling necessary to social affection; unlike the wearing-away that knowledge causes in perceptual experience, for Eliot love “grows in proportion to the intimacy of its knowledge”

---
and thus can compensate for the ravages of time. Like Burke, she imagines a role for culture in holding on to “old inferior things,” although for her this role is most clearly described in contrast to the process of irrevocable loss evoked by evolutionary theory. But unlike Burke she is deeply ambivalent about this cultural ideal, and in The Lifted Veil (1859) she imagines a world in which old things, rather than being discarded, pile up vertiginously and threaten to whelm the sensitive observer with their collective pressure. I read this as an aesthetic nightmare: art is able to fix the past in artificial form and thus to preserve it for future enjoyment, but the same fixity that allows it to continue on beyond its “natural” term threatens to become a doom that possesses rather than nurtures later perceptions. I argue that The Legend of Jubal (1870), a little-discussed late poem of Eliot’s, dramatizes Eliot’s ambivalence by having past art come to life in the fully personified form of Jubal, and staging a ritual murder in which Jubal, despite his weak, decaying form, is attacked as posing a threat that must be resisted. Thus Eliot, who in some ways provides the strongest version of the cultural vision Burke lays out in his arguments against the Revolution, also gravely undermines that vision.

To conclude, I turn briefly to John Stuart Mill’s famous claim in 1831 that British society has undergone a fundamental change, in which a sense of historical continuity from age to age has given way to a sense of historical difference. Mill writes that this change has riven society: “Mankind are then divided, into those who are still what they were, and those who have changed: into the men of the present age, and the men of the past.” These people coexist during the “age of transition” that Mill names, but it does not seem quite right to call them contemporaries. For they inhabit starkly different experiences of time—one continuing on as they have been in a world that appears to deteriorate around them, the other with faces set toward the promise of a new and unknown future, with each change offering some new beginning. This dissertation, in a sense, is

---

about people and things which “are still what they were,” in all the quiet anticlimax of that phrase: it takes up narratives of continuing, of remaining, of staying behind. And it is about persons who find that they have no future in the rapidly modernizing world: Michael, whose “substance” is diminished by an economy of credit and debt, and who in losing his son is left to finish his days on “patrimonial fields” to be sold away after his death; the mariners-turned-lotos-eaters, who have already been written into history and “half-forgotten” at home, and who are reluctant to disturb the new order in which their sons have replaced them; and Jubal, the founder of the Arts, who proselytizes them with missionary zeal and returns to his birthplace, now a bustling city, only to be beaten to death by the younger musicians who have succeeded him. These men are all remnants doomed to their own obsolescence and thrown in the “remote repository” of things forgotten by modernity: this is about what it is like to be inside that shadowy room.
Chapter 1

“Blind Love”:

Wordsworth’s Feeling for the Insensible

tis not here
Record of what hath been is now no more

---

Wordsworth

Critics have often read Wordsworth’s poems as telling the story of an imaginative falling off, whether in the Platonic lapse of the Intimations Ode or in the crisis of poetic faith recorded in the 1805 Prelude. In this chapter I take up another falling off, critically unnoticed in Wordsworth’s poetry: the gradual decline in vivid perceptions of sensible objects as those objects become familiar. Wordsworth interprets this decline as a general feature of perceptual experience and he designs his early poetry to correct it. Focusing on poems in 1799 and 1800, I identify Wordsworth’s ambivalence in this period toward the formal process of reclaiming early, familiar sensations for later aesthetic pleasure. I read two poems as in conversation with one another about this process: the 1799 Prelude (and more specifically the spots of time passage), and the 1800 “Michael.” Wordsworth critics, including Geoffrey Hartman, James Chandler, and David Bromwich, have read these poems as proceeding along similar aesthetic lines, and in particular have argued that Wordsworth models Michael’s sheepfold as a spot of time. In their arguments the sheepfold, like
the spot, is constitutive of Wordsworthian aesthetic form more generally, as a figure marking how vivid yet ordinary images take on extraordinary meaning in imaginative remembrance.¹

In contrast to these readings, I argue that the two poems give fundamentally incompatible accounts of how to sustain pleasure in familiar things. I touch briefly on the spots of time as aesthetic forms that resist perceptual decay, rescuing particular past experiences from imaginative decline by imbuing them with new emotional significance; I then dwell at length on the distinctly “unspotty” temporality in “Michael,” in which iterated experience takes narrative precedence over emotionally intense singular events. Where the spots of time bestow significance on ordinary perceptions by giving them an “independent life” separate from their original contexts, “Michael” reveals a life in which pleasure and meaning are utterly dependent on context. Rather than trying to revive declining perceptions of familiar forms, “Michael” takes their decline as a matter of course and finds aesthetic value not in vivid sensations but in the sustaining power of attachment to objects of “blind love.”

“We live by admiration and by love”

The idea of perception as a temporal affair, in which sensations’ force declines with familiarity, was standard by the turn of the nineteenth century. As Joseph Priestley explains in a 1762 lecture, “the oftener any sensations are repeated, the less we are affected by them.”² For a more technical account we can turn briefly to David Hartley, whose associationist philosophy strongly influenced Wordsworth and who speculatively explains the “fact” of a “decrease in the efficacy of impressions frequently repeated” as a function of the sensory organs sending “weaker and weaker vibrations perpetually to the brain, upon every successive renewal of the same impression,” and the brain

---


similarly becoming “less and less disposed to receive strong vibrations, though the power of communication from the impressions should continue the same.” My concern, however, is not with the technical details of perceptual decline as Hartley and other contemporary physiologists formulated it: rather it is with the general picture of perception that emerges from these accounts. Over time the body perceptually unmoors from the world around it, less able to sensitively respond to familiar impressions even though they “continue the same.” This picture poses a problem for Wordsworth’s hope to retain an unabating pleasure in what he called the “simple produce of the common day.”

Wordsworth addresses this problem most directly in an 1804 draft passage for *The Prelude*, to which I turn first as providing his earliest account of the mind’s developing imaginative interaction with the sensible world, and as retrospectively clarifying his motives in formulating the spots of time. The passage, beginning “We live by admiration and by love,” and found in Manuscript Y in Ernest de Selincourt’s numbering, has two parts: it describes an early stage of imaginative decline in which perceptions become less vivid as they become more familiar, and then tells how “tutored” minds veer from this decline in later life, restoring vividness in full to a depleted world. Taken as a whole it makes the case, for which the spots of time will be cited as evidence in the 1805 *Prelude*, for the imagination as “lord and master”—or in the language of MS. Y, “monarch & king”—of the sensible world. The mind proves its mastery through preserving images from decay. “Tis not here

---


4For recent criticism on Wordsworth’s relation to contemporary psycho-physiology, see Alan Richardson, who argues that Wordsworth’s poetry and poetic theory in the 1790s resembles the material vitalism of contemporaneous “neuroscience,” particularly in rejecting earlier mechanistic accounts of psychological development. Noel Jackson argues that eighteenth-century sensationist psychology enables Wordsworth’s self-conscious political ambivalence: even as his “language of the sense” announces its aesthetic autonomy from a larger political world, it does so in sensuous, embodied language that establishes a new empirical basis for political engagement. Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

"Record of what hath been is now no more,” Wordsworth writes:

    But primary & independent life
    No glimmering residue of splendours past
    Things in decline or faded
    Nothing declind or faded

The final line is intended as an alternate for the line that comes before it, not a successor. Nevertheless, read in juxtaposition as Wordsworth has left them (neither line is crossed out), they convey a deep anxiety concerning the resilience of the imagination against the forces of decline that assail it—an anxiety only made more striking by the clipped tetrameter showing up in a field of blank verse. At the heart of this urgent claim—“nothing declind or faded”—is a fantasy of images that never lose their vividness, that don’t appear to wear out with use.

    But if the imagination eventually achieves the power to keep off its own decay, this is only after a long period in which its perceptions do “decline” and “fade.” In tracing the mind’s progress from infancy up to its imaginative resurgance in later life, Wordsworth describes particular perceptions as continually wearing away into the background of attention, becoming supplanted by newer images which promise more excitement. To the infant everything is new, and so “babes in arms” delight in it all: “a little rill / Of water sparkling down a rocky slope / By the wayside, a beast, a bird, a flower.” But as many of these things “become familiar, agitate us less,” the child moves on to stranger objects for its pleasure:

    Braced, startled into notice, lifted up […]
    By things of Nature’s rarer workmanship,
    Her scattered accidents of sight and sound:
    The peacock’s fan with all its [ ] eyes
    Unfurled; the rainbow; or the cuckoo’s shout;

---

6William Wordsworth, The Thirteen-Book Prelude, ed. Mark L. Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 386–7. All citations of the rougher, unpunctuated lines from MS. Y are to this edition, for which I will cite page numbers. The Norton edition has a cleaned-up, punctuated version of the MS. Y passage, to which I refer when I cite line numbers.

An echo; or the glowworm’s faery lamp. (ll. 22–7)\(^8\)

Already at this early stage the imagination is no longer alive to all things alike, craving rather what is “scattered” or “rarer,” the “accidental” rather than the essential. Edmund Burke describes this process in *A Philosophical Enquiry* when he writes of how curiosity “soon exhausts the variety which is commonly to be met with in nature; the same things make frequent returns, and they return with less and less of any agreeable effect.”\(^9\) In Wordsworth’s account this disagreeable failure of familiar things leads us away from nature altogether, towards “fable” and “romance” which tell of “[t]rees that bear gems for fruit, rocks spouting milk, / And diamond palaces, and birds that sing / With human voices” (ll. 85–7).

Critics have read the MS. Y passage as reviewing Wordsworth’s claims elsewhere that the imagination is schooled by beauty and by fear.\(^10\) But what the passage shows above all is that the developing mind is in thrall to novelty. “Admiration,” the first of Wordsworth’s two key terms (we will come to “love” later), is a response to what is “rare,” “uncommon,” “new,” or “strange”: this explains the successive lapses of interest in things as they become more familiar.\(^11\) Wordsworth makes it clear that the pleasure we get from novelty is not a sustainable mode of feeling. As the imagination travels from “a rill of water” to “the glowworm’s faery lamp” to “rocks spouting milk,” it gets farther and farther from what is easily available. Eventually it turns for its pleasure to extravagant artifice—“fanciful devices,” “[r]econdite trifles,” “ingenious gawds” (383). With these we have been carried far beyond “the cuckoo’s shout”; “ingenious gawds” may abound in the novelty-junkie’s paradise, but they surely make up some sort of Wordsworthian hell:

---

\(^8\)I reproduce the editors’ notation for the transcribed manuscript, much of which is illegible. (Words in brackets are now rendered illegible but were transcribed by De Selincourt before they became so.)


\(^11\)See Isaac Watts’ influential treatise on the passions for this definition. I have cited Watts because *The Doctrine of the Passions Explained and Improved* suggestively names “admiration” and “love” as the two “primitive passions,” as Wordsworth does. Wordsworth uses “admiration” in its older sense of “wonder” or “surprise,” rather than the newer sense of “esteem” which we primarily use today. Isaac Watts, *The Doctrine of the Passions* (London: T. Longman, 1751), 588.
In short, whatever object savours least
Of mind’s right understanding and [plain life],
Is least in Nature, seems to please [us] most,
Affects us with most vehement delight. (ll. 116–9)

Geoffrey Hartman has famously argued that the Wordsworthian imagination bends away from nature towards apocalyptic self-recognition. Here we see Wordsworth reflecting on a similar attraction to what “is least in Nature,” but in the more circumscribed language of eighteenth-century theory of mind. The MS. Y passage, that is, shows the imagination’s impulse to rove from the natural world and from common objects not as a characteristic unique to Wordsworth’s visionary life, but as a more general feature of human psychology.

Thus perception is ordered around the uncommon elements in a given scene:

… the spirits are in dance if aught
At home of glaring spectacle, or new
Be interwoven with the common sights
Which Earth presents … (ll. 110–3)

“The common sights / Which Earth presents” do not excite pleasure on their own. Only if something “glaring” or “new” weaves into the familiar texture of “home,” then the mind leaps to attention, its animal “spirits” dancing. This will never do, not for the kind of poetry Wordsworth wants to write. And this picture of how attention works looks even grimmer when set beside his other contemporary account of mental life: if the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* describes contemporary historical changes forcing the mind towards “gross and violent stimulants,” the MS. Y passage shows our basic psychology conspiring to the same end.

But there is hope yet. This imaginative falling-away is the end of the road only for “untutor’d minds”:

Untutor’d minds stop here and after life
Leads them no farther vivid images
To these & strong sensations must be given
They cannot make them … (383)
By contrast, something curious happens for tutored minds. They no longer need “vivid images” and “strong sensations” to be given to them; Wordsworth intimates that they can make them, as if the sensible world has become irrelevant to perception. The tutored mind experiences a “second birth” in which everything feels new again:

The first and earliest motions of his life,
I mean of his rememberable time,
Redound upon him with a stronger flood.
In speculation he is like a child—
With this advantage, that he now can rest
Upon himself. (ll. 159–64)

Past delights revive again, and what Coleridge calls the “film of familiarity” seems to lift, so that the adult sees as if from the perspective of a “child.” Wordsworth makes it clear that this resurgence comes from the mind, which “irradiates” outward to illuminate what is in darkness, rather than from the world. The favored adult “can rest / Upon himself,” enjoying the “primary & independent life” of the imagination without depending any longer on sensible forms for pleasure. It is as if the imagination, finding the outward world slipping away, creates an alternative world within, like the outward in every respect except that inside there is “nothing declind or faded.” This, I will argue, is what the spots of time do in the 1799 Prelude.

The MS. Y passage, in positing a “second birth” in which images are powerfully revived against their decline, shows how Wordsworth positioned his hope for imaginative life in response to a general account of perceptual decay. But it also relates a secondary process, the gradual growth of “love,” which attaches us to the world in a curiously “insensible” way, and which will prove essential to understanding “Michael” as finding pleasure even in the faint perceptions of a seemingly-fading world. Unlike the vivid attention we give to strong sensations, love happens when we’re not looking—or at least not looking very closely. Even as “common” and “ordinary” things appear to be “without regard,” Wordsworth argues, they “are fastening on the heart / Insensibly”:

“So that we love not knowing that we love / And feel not knowing whence our feelings come” (391). In an empiricist model of mind sense perceptions provide us with knowledge, becoming ideas that essentially replace the sensations that gave rise to them. But here Wordsworth imagines a remnant of sensation that escapes this conversion, a kind of residual stickiness that resists clean separation into the realm of ideas and that keeps us in unknowing if slight contact with the world. This residue he calls “love,” as marking out the ways we feel the world without translating those feelings into detachable images. The images Wordsworth does cite as feeding love indicate things so slight as to be on the edge of awareness: “Smoke breathing up by day from cottage trees,” where we imagine the trees dispersing the smoke into something as thin as an exhalation; or a “beauteous sunbeam in a sunny shed,” where it’s not clear if the beam appears separately from the general radiance suffusing the scene (ll. 225, 226). These are hardly “vivid images” or “strong sensations,” but in their slightness Wordsworth shapes a pleasure that doesn’t need intensity to survive. This mode of unknowing feeling—even “insensible” feeling, as occurring below the level of conscious awareness—is the ground of the aesthetic experience we will see Wordsworth sketch out in “Michael,” and is notably distinct from the powerfully sensible forms of the spots of time.

I began this section considering Wordsworth’s resistance towards a concept of the imagination as a “glimmering residue of splendours past / Things in decline or faded,” and end it with his intimation, almost against himself, of a residue of feeling that keeps us attached to the world despite its declining and fading. Both of these things run counter to the notion of Wordsworth as a “poet of reflection” rather than a “poet of sensation,” as Arthur Henry Hallam famously

---

13 Kevis Goodman writes brilliantly on the “sense for history” as an “affective residue” that “elude[s] or exceed[s] the Lockean idea.” While historicist critics often work to establish a (usually suppressed) historical context for a given work—for example, reconstructing a specific event that a poem obliquely refers to through denial—Goodman creditably argues that a text might record history more generally, through a sensory or affective openness. But where for Goodman this residue appears in moments of “sensory discomfort” in which the text fails to harmonize rival mediations of history, in this section for The Prelude and in Michael Wordsworth writes on sensations that go unideated because they are too comfortable to attract the mind’s notice. If they convey a history, it is not a history of what “hurts,” as Fredric Jameson and Goodman define history, but rather of what is easily received as a part of everyday life. Kevis Goodman, Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8. See Nicholas Roe on the difficulty of pinpointing a precise excluded historical context for a poem. Nicholas Roe, The Politics of Nature: Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1992).
propounded in 1831; in formulating both Wordsworth is concerned above all to find pleasure in the early, common sensations that pleased us in childhood. But they go about this in very different ways. The “primary & independent life” of the lordly imagination, manifestly related to the “independent life” of the spots of time, restores vividness to what is faded by defamiliarizing it, as I will argue in the next section. By contrast, in “Michael” Wordsworth feels out a way of finding pleasure in familiar objects without alienating them, which makes up for their sensible decline with the “strength of love.”

“There are in our existence spots of time”

In touching on the spots of time as Wordsworth first formulates them in the 1799 Prelude, I bring to salience three aspects: the spots do not decay; they are formally distinct from their surroundings; and they are portable through time. These features look particularly significant in light of the MS. Y passage’s account of an imaginative “second birth” that rescues images from decline through restoring them to “independent life.” I will argue that the 1799 Prelude shows the spots to be formed in bad faith, as becoming vivid only through being separated from the common decay around them. To put it crudely, the spots are not so different from the artificial “gawds” that Wordsworth reacts against in MS. Y; they gain interest through being perceived in contrast with their more familiar surroundings, and they demand a mode of attention similar to that produced by the “glaring spectacle.”

The primary “virtue” of the spots for Wordsworth, in which “virtue” indicates both a characteristic property and a positive moral good, is that they do not degrade with time and use. Images “impressed” on the mind like ordinary sense impressions, the spots of time diverge from ordinary sense impressions in becoming “forms / That yet exist with independent life, / And, like

their archetypes, know no decay.” The images the spots contain are just as vivid as they were when they first imprinted on the mind; as Hartman writes (indicating the first spot), they keep “as freshly visible among the moldering effects of time as the name under the gallows” (217).

There are in our existence spots of time
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
By trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds—
Especially the imaginative power—
Are nourished and invisibly repaired. (ll. 288–94)

Although Wordsworth models the spots of time on natural forms, with their “fructifying,” “nourishing,” and “repairing” qualities all signaling organic processes, these very qualities actually separate the spots from organic life. For the mark of an organism is not just growth but also decay—something that the content of the original spots of time, with the drowned man, the hanged man, and the death of Wordsworth’s father, all unmistakably convey. While natural “archetypes” may “know no decay,” as Wordsworth optimistically claims, their particular instances certainly do: sheep may continue to baa and breed without declining as a species, but the “single sheep” in the second spot of time is long gone by the time Wordsworth writes this passage. And the spots of time mark above all the vividness of particular images, not of their enduring types—the “visionary dreariness” of the one “woman and her garments vexed and tossed / By the strong wind,” not of other women similarly circumstanced (ll. 322, 326–7). Thus to make this particular image one that “knows no decay” is to highlight its artifice rather than its naturalness: the imagination’s nourishment is not like actual fruit, which is prone to spoil, but rather like a still life, which is not. Wordsworth’s revisions of this passage over the next six years indicate his awareness of this artifice: as “fructifying” becomes “vivifying” becomes “renovating,” the spots’ power to renew and

---

15 1799 Prelude, Book 1, ll. 285–7. All references to the 1799 Prelude are to the Norton edition. We can recognize here the same language that will be used to describe the favored mind’s “second birth” in the 1804 MS. Y passage, in which old perceptions dance to life again, surging up with a self-sufficient imaginative vigor strong enough to match the “living & to live” “archetypes” of the sensible world.
be renewed drifts from a lush fecundity to a chillier and possibly inorganic remodeling.

So the first thing to notice about the spots of time is that they are impervious to decay, a “virtue” that distinguishes them from the natural objects that they image. The second thing to notice is that they are isolated from their context. This is above all evident in the name Wordsworth calls them by: a “spot” is defined by contrast with its surroundings, a contrast that Wordsworth drives home by indicating the spots’ “distinct preeminence” above a welter of indefinite experience. Moreover, a spot is the perfect size to be taken in by the mind’s eye—not so tiny as a point, not so unwieldy as an expanse. The spots shape life around distinctively remembered episodic pieces; they neither give a moment-by-moment account nor try to convey the wider breadth of habitual being. Each spot describes clear, unfussy images—“naked wall,” “single sheep,” “whistling hawthorn”—the outlines of which we know remain sharp and well—“repaired.” The spots’ clear preeminence, then, invites the mode of attention depicted in the MS. Y passage, in which a “glaring spectacle, or new” leaps out amidst “the common sights / Which earth presents” and commands our attention. We don’t need to go so far as to describe the spots as “contrasts strong and harsh,” as Wordsworth describes the “ingenious gawds,” but contrast is still one of their primary features (MS. Y, l. 113).

The spots of time do not decay; they are well-defined forms that stand out from their context; and finally, they are portable. Jonathan Wordsworth criticizes the poet’s choice to relocate the “spots” to Book 11 in the 1805 Prelude; he writes that the passage in 1805 “is removed a very long way from the poetry of Book I with which it had originally been connected, and has to take a structural weight that it cannot at all easily bear.” But he fails to notice that this is the spots’ essential function, to dislocate from their “origin” so as to bear a “structural weight” of imaginative significance in other times and places. The spots “exist with independent life” apart from the scene of their making; although they image the accidents of time and place they are not bound

---

17Critics have argued that the spots’ portability is essential to their accruing new meaning over time. See for instance David S. Miall, “Wordsworth and ‘The Prelude’: The Problematics of Feeling,” Studies in Romanticism 31, no. 2 (July 1992): 233–53.
to those accidents—and in fact they show us, as Wordsworth goes on to say in Book 11, “that the mind / Is lord and master, and that outward sense / Is but the obedient servant of her will” (1805, ll. 270–2). And of course these features which I have prized apart all work together: because the spots stand out with “preeminence” they can be dislocated from context, and because they can be dislocated from context they can take on new significance, and because they can take on new significance they are preserved from decay, and so on. The spots only intensify over time, then, as they become further distinct from their fading surroundings and gather ever more meaning around one imagistic form.

The spots’ liberation through time is an act of “troubled pleasure,” to use Wordsworth’s language from earlier in The Prelude, in which certain images are stolen away from the scene of their making.\footnote{The term “liberation” is Hartman’s, who describes the spots as signalling the imagination’s freedom to seek nature.} In the episode which sets the stage for the spots of time passage in the 1799 Prelude, a drowned man rises “bolt upright” from a “calm lake,” a rising that resembles a ghoulish self-resurrection but that is in fact caused by the “iron hooks” and “long poles” of those who fish him out (ll. 278, 271, 276). In this image of an inert body arrested at the point of inevitable decay and shooting up with what we might call “distinct preeminence” “‘mid that beauteous scene / Of trees and hill and water,” Wordsworth obliquely prefigures the spots’ strange reanimacy: they too are dredged up from their surroundings through being “attached” to “far other feelings,” where both “far” and “other” quietly note the alienation of this process (ll. 277–8, 285). The spots’ claim to “independent life” is weakened if not entirely unsubstantiated by this preliminary, spectral revival, and the poet’s efforts to stave off certain images’ decay (so insistent in MS. Y) begins to look in this context like sheer denialism. The probing through the “calm” water for the drowned man is palpably related to the poet’s later searching for early experience through the “still water” of “past time,” a searching which by association becomes a macabre refusal to let the dead stay dead (1805, Book 4, ll. 249, 264).

James Chandler has read the spots of time against their ostensible liberation, arguing that
they provide a Burkean solution to a Burkean problem. Faced with the task of deciding a theme for his grand poem, Chandler claims, Wordsworth realizes that his choice is not free but rather fundamentally constrained by his cultural inheritance. The spots of time “prove” this constraint by determining the poem along lines of early prejudice, and correct Wordsworth’s erroneous belief, reflected upon in the 1805 Prelude, that he could somehow “succeed in ‘shaking off’ / The accidents of nature, time and place / That make up the weak being of the past’” (Wordsworth’s Second Nature, 194). I agree with Chandler that Wordsworth uses the spots of time to address a Burkean problem, which I would formulate (somewhat differently from Chandler) as trying to affirm the efficacy of early experience to sustain later life; but I disagree that his solution is as neatly settled as Chandler makes it out to be. The spots of time, although they assert the formative value of early experience, produce that value through dislocation: they gain their “distinct preeminence” in Wordsworth’s mind at the cost of his disregard for whatever immediately surrounded them. That is, they confirm rather than disconfirm the imagination’s power to “shake off” the past. “Nature, time, and place” do in fact become “accidents” (a word that Wordsworth also uses, suggestively, in introducing the spots of time in 1799) in relation to the spots of time, whose essence is rather a supposedly-“independent” imagistic life that gathers its strength precisely through breaking free from the past’s “weakness.”

Reading the spots as forms of bad faith, which dislocate precisely the common things they are designed to preserve, we can for the first time understand “Michael” not as developing another instance of a spot, but as exploring an alternative “unspotty” time in which perceptions are allowed to decline. Critics have described a formal resemblance between Michael’s sheepfold and the spot: Geoffrey Hartman cites the sheepfold as an instance of Wordsworth’s “spot syndrome”; James Chandler sees the sheepfold as symbolizing tradition in the same way as a spot; and David Bromwich claims that in Wordsworth’s letter on “Michael” and “The Brothers” to Charles James Fox “one sees the connection … between a spot of ground (returned to as property) and a spot of time (carried in the mind as ideal property)” (Disowned by Memory, 157). In contrast to these readings, I argue that the sheepfold is a fundamentally different aesthetic form than is the spot,
and that its difference reflects Wordsworth’s uneasiness over the spots’ dislocated relation to their fading surroundings in the past. For the distinction which Bromwich elides (between a spot returned to and a spot carried along) is deeply important rather than casual: in “Michael” we see an aesthetic sensibility that is hyperlocated, entirely dependent on context. Through a close reading of “Michael” I discover a new aesthetic mode in Wordsworth’s early poetry, one more obviously conservative, in a Burkean sense, than the spots of time. As we saw in the previous chapter, Burke’s response to the Revolution redirects imaginative pleasure towards a feeling for the subtle, hardly-noticeable weight of enduring cultural forms. Along similar lines, “Michael” relates a narrative attuned to the quiet notes of continuance through time, and more directly than Burke engages with an aesthetics of slight sensations. Rather than trying to revive the “declind or faded” forms of the past through the shock of alienation, in “Michael” Wordsworth takes their sensible decline as a matter of course and finds their value not in their vividness but in the sustaining pleasure of attachment to objects of “blind love.”

“Michael”

In the opening frame of “Michael,” the narrator invites an implied listener to turn aside “from the public way” into a nearby valley to which the ensuing story “appertains.” This invitation, and the scene to which it leads, figures a sleight of hand. An expectation of novelty is raised: the listener is directed to a “hidden valley,” surely concealing some secret worth her detour. But this hint of sensationalism dissipates as it becomes clear that the “hiddenness” in question is not a cover-up but rather a hiding in plain sight:

Nor should I have made mention of this Dell
But for one object which you might pass by,
Might see and notice not. Beside the brook
There is a straggling heap of unhewn stones!¹⁹

What attention the listener had reserved for a sensational tale now flows to this baldly ordinary object. The “heap of unhewn stones” does not resolve into a sheepfold for over 300 more lines; in this scene there is little about this object to distinguish it from all the other “rocks and stones” that the narrator has described as littering the landscape. It is entirely unobtrusive, an “object which you might pass by, / Might see and notice not.” An easily “unregarded sight,” like the common objects in MS. Y above, the heap of stones does not organize the viewer’s perceptual field by striking her with an unusual impression to which she must attend. Rather, it forms part of the less-differentiated world against which striking things can appear. Yet Wordsworth emotionally underlines it, with what must be one of the most incongruous exclamation points in English literature. Through this scene we get a praxis of how the poem is to work as a whole, in guiding the reader through the process of turning from “vivid images” and “strong sensations” to feel pleasure in something minimally discriminated from the ordinary.

The “straggling” and “unhewn” form aptly figures the meandering, unfocused narrative that follows. In reading “Michael” we struggle with all the “feelings of strangeness and awkwardness” that the first edition of Lyrical Ballads advertised. This narrative strangeness, which has received relatively little attention in critical readings, is all the more surprising given the poem’s potentially sensational plot. Uniquely in Lyrical Ballads, “Michael” frames a story that could serve as the skeleton for a novel: Michael, a shepherd who lives in a secluded vale with his wife Isabel and son Luke, learns that a bond of surety he gave for his nephew must be paid on the failure of his brother to meet its terms; Michael reluctantly sends Luke to work for a relation in the city to pay off the debt rather than sell his land; Luke departs and does well for a while but, as all proper country boys must, gets into a bad way in the big city and flees the country after committing

---

2008), ll. 14–7. All references to “Michael” in its published, non-draft version are to Stephen Gill’s edition.


some unnamed crime; Michael and Isabel carry on as best they can after this, until they die and their land is sold. The unexpected debt, the inheritance placed in jeopardy, and the sheltered son pressed by necessity to make his way in the world—all these are already staple ingredients of novels by the turn of the century, even if a novel would never have closed on Wordsworth’s stark resolution.\footnote{We can compare for instance Oliver Goldsmith’s \textit{The Vicar of Wakefield} (1766), which Wordsworth had read; although Goldsmith’s novel treats a different social class, is also about the moral fortitude of a father after his family is placed in financial distress through a merchant’s unscrupulousness.}

And yet Wordsworth makes little of what could be a melodrama, choosing instead to dwell minutely on the family’s typical life and on their conversations. He doles out story sparingly: we don’t get the first plot point until line 216, almost halfway through the poem, and even after that we get little to go on. As the narrator puts it, his tale is “ungarnish’d with events”—as if events were a dispensable parsley rather than the main narrative meal (l. 19). This restraint is most striking in the brevity with which the narrator treats Luke’s downfall in the city and criminal flight from the country. Here, where we most want and expect details, we get none. The poem intimates some kind of moral struggle—Luke “began / To slacken in his duty,” and “at length / … gave himself / To evil courses,” with the line breaks after “began” and “at length” marking the hesitations of decision (ll. 451–4). But the content is never filled in; we never find out what “evil courses” tempted Luke, nor what “ignominy and shame” drove him to flee the country, although these on their own could have taken up many pages in the hands of another author. The sole stuff of tantalizing (if somewhat clichéd) story is related almost tonelessly in six lines, as an aside: “Meantime …” “Meantime,” that is, to the much less sensational tale of Michael’s daily routine, to which the narrator returns immediately after relating Luke’s fall. The conversational episodes that take up much of the poem do little to sharpen the plot; if anything, they further confound it. For instance: Michael mentions to Isabel his plan to dispatch Luke to the city, noting that he should go “to-morrow, or the next day, or to-night”; yet then “five days” pass by without event, at which point we learn that Isabel has noticed “for the last two nights” that Michael was troubled in his sleep,
and so she tells Luke to stay (ll. 291, 294, 300). We think the matter is settled, but a week later a letter arrives promising a situation for Luke, and Michael resolves, and carries out his resolve, to send Luke off on the morrow. If you want to reach for an aspirin that’s because this is confusing: strangely wasting narrative economy in a story that elsewhere is so terse, these decisions, reversals, and uncertainties fracture any forceful picture of the family’s emotional distress in their time of crisis, and rather diffuse that distress throughout the texture of their daily converse.

Wordsworth’s emphasis throughout the poem on repeated actions rather than singular events anticipates narrative developments that happen much later in the century. (This clumsy anticipation may partly explain some of the awkwardness we feel in trying to follow the story.) Whereas in novels written at the turn of the century, as Gérard Genette notes, “iterative sections are almost always functionally subordinate to singular scenes,” in “Michael” Wordsworth challenges this subordination—long before Genette sees any novelist doing anything of the kind. The poem’s narrative center is not its singulative plot, but rather the iterative action of everyday life. Thus while we might be tempted to describe the poem’s primary arc as following Michael’s unexpected incurring of debt, his decision to send Luke to the city to work off that debt, and Luke’s subsequent descent into “evil courses,” I propose that we instead read these events as background to the real story, which itself might almost be summed up by the two “histories” that Michael himself tells Luke by the sheepfold: “Day by day passed on, / And still I loved thee with an encreasing love”; and the other, “Month followed month, / And in the open fields my life was passed” (ll. 352–3, 359–60). These stories in miniature resist the pressures of peripety, as does the larger tale itself; “Michael” achieves narrative fulfillment not through measuring dramatic change, but rather through tracing repeated and continuing actions through time. Like Burke’s anticlimactic account of the Glorious Revolution as an event that changed nothing whatsoever, Wordsworth’s narrator tells a tale in which time “going by from year to year had found / And left” a man almost exactly the same (ll.

---

This emphasis on continuity appears most concretely as the poem concludes with the object with which it began: “the remains / Of the unfinished Sheep-fold” (ll. 489–90). “Michael” is typically read as a poem about loss. But to fully understand its narrative mechanism we have to read these “remains” not only as leftovers—the negative relief of destruction and loss—but also as forms of positive continuity. The sheepfold “remains” less in the sense of “to be left behind after … destruction” and more in the sense of “to continue to exist,” “to abide,” “to stay.” Thus the poem’s recurring objects and phrases—the sheepfold, the clipping tree, the “brook of Green-head Gill,” and the description of Michael exactly repeated at the story’s beginning and end, “His bodily frame had been from youth to age / Of an unusual strength”—should be read as approximating repetition without a difference, inasmuch as such a thing is possible (ll. 2, 43–4, 463–4). These things repeat as formal echoes of Michael’s own regular habits and invite the reader to feel a pleasure that, like Michael’s own, arises from the persistence of certain things and feelings in time. Remaining, however shaped by difference or change, is the poem’s real organizing force.

But to see “remaining” as an event in its own right, and not just as the negative relief of an event of change, we have to make a shift in critical emphasis. In this we are helped by Anne-Lise François’ elegant theorization of “‘nothing’ as an event made or allowed to happen.” Where literary critics work to make much out of a given text, François turns her attention on texts that “make do with little.” Instead of demanding vigorous critical labor to unearth their meaning, they yield it up as an “open secret,” what François calls “a gift of revelation so transmuted it’s taken for granted—absorbed into the ground of the ordinary—before being perceived as such, buried as part of its reception rather than repression.” The plot of remaining in “Michael,” the

---

24 OED, “remain.”

25 Anne-Lise François, Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), xv, 10. François’ book resonates with “Michael” in more than just this way. Her larger argument contests the critical need to make literature “count,” what she describes as “the normative bias in favor of the demonstrable, dramatic development and realization of human powers characteristic of, but not limited to, the capitalist investment in value and work and the Enlightenment allegiance to rationalism and unbounded progress” (xvi). Thus she attends to what she calls “uncounted experience,” a phrase which echoes the “uncounted hours” regularly lit by the lamp at Michael’s cottage, The Evening Star. But in this comparison we can also spell out the difference between the “nothing” that
poem’s attention to continuity amidst change, can be read as Wordsworth’s own development of an “open secret,” just as the sheepfold, as “an object which you might pass by, / Might see and notice not,” neatly anticipates François’s description of a “revelation … absorbed into the ground of the ordinary.”

François’s attention to making do with little, with what she calls a “minimal contentment,” aptly figures the kind of emotional sustenance which Michael receives from continuity and which the poem by extension offers to its readers. Where the spots of time allow the reflective self to gather vast emotional gains from even minor past experiences, producing new significance through endless resituation, Michael’s unbroken contact with his land affords him only an “insensible” pleasure of unknowing love like that described at the MS. Y passage’s end:

… these fields, these hills
Which were his living Being, even more
Than his own Blood—what could they less? had laid
Strong hold on his affections, were to him
A pleasurable feeling of blind love,
The pleasure which there is in life itself. (ll. 74–9)

Michael has felt “these fields, these hills” so often that they have ceased to sensibly register their difference from him; he is enveloped in them as he is in his own body, and feels them as he feels his blood beating through his veins. The “pleasurable feeling” they raise in him is likewise barely sensible, if felt at all: “A pleasurable feeling of blind love, / The pleasure which there is in life itself.” This is surely the most pared-down pleasure available to a living thing—something which hums beneath the surface of all other sensations, the most continuous feeling that we have. Michael dwells in a border region between sensibility and insensitivity, where sensations have happened in “Michael” and the nothing that François is interested in. The hours may go “uncounted” in “Michael” because one hour contains much the same activities as another, such that there is little point in differentiating them. In this the uncounted hours resemble François’ minimal happenings. But these hours do count in that they add to the family’s material possessions and financial security. As David Simpson notes, there is a vast difference between the subsistence economy depicted in Michael and the surplus economy created by a capitalist drive of the sort that both François and Wordsworth critique. David Simpson, Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement (New York: Methuen, 1987).
“declind” and “faded” and yet have left some residue behind. In the trope that is so startling in this passage—the metonymic substitution of cause for effect in the fields and hills as Michael’s “pleasurable feeling”—we see the basic logic of contiguity that undergirds feeling in the poem. Michael’s pleasure is produced not through significant dislocation, as with the spots of time, but through immediate contact.

This “pleasure which there is in life itself” is what remains to Michael after Luke’s flight and the certain loss of his family land. Marjorie Levinson reads Michael’s pleasure as “incumbent upon a practical and teleological (‘forward-looking’) outlook,” thus implying that it comes to an end when he has nothing left to anticipate. But Michael is led through the valley of despair only to learn that it was not hope—not a forward-looking expectation of a different future—that had upheld him all along but rather “blind love.” Even after “all his hopes were gone,” the poem conveys a remnant of pleasure in his continued relationship to the land that had afforded him delight in the first place: “Among the rocks / He went, and still looked up to sun and cloud, / And listened to the wind” (ll. 302, 464–6). We can contrast Michael’s strangely sustained affection with Richard Payne Knight’s contemporary imagination of the misery of a life without hope of change:

Were we doomed to spend our lives with one set of unchanging objects, which could afford no new varieties either of sensations, images, or ideas … all around us would soon have the tiresome sameness of the walls of a cell. If to this were added prescience of every event that was to happen to us through life; so as to extinguish hope and expectation, and every feeling of suspense or pleasure of novelty, it would scarcely be possible for any gratifications, that remained, to render existence endurable.

Michael is placed in a situation similar to this. The sun, cloud, and wind have long since “run their changes,” in Wordsworth’s language from MS. Y, and offer no “new varieties” to the shepherd. Similarly, after Luke’s desertion, “hope and expectation, and every feeling of suspense or pleasure of novelty” have all been taken from his father. And yet the building stands: “There is a comfort

---


in the strength of love; / ’Twill make a thing endurable” (ll. 457–8). “Michael” strips away the teleological framework on which narrative interest and—in Knight’s formulation—even life interest are supposed to depend, and finds an affective structure yet more basic that still remains.

By now we are in a place to appreciate the sheepfold’s utter strangeness as an aesthetic object. In “Michael” Wordsworth reshapes the grounds of aesthetic pleasure, yielding something fundamentally unlike the intensely vivid spots of time—which with their well-formedness and their productive “fructifying” of significance seem paradigmatic of the aesthetic. As in the published poem, early drafts for “Michael” mark the sheepfold’s strongest characteristic as its paradoxically shapeless shape:

There is a shapeless crowd of unhewn stones
That lie together, some in heaps and some
In lines that seem to keep themselves alive
In the last dotage of a dying form—

The sheepfold invites our attention to things that lack the “distinct preeminece” of vivid experience: “heaps” and “lines” that fail to achieve the clarity of the spot. The “unhewn stones” are tacitly linked to Michael’s life, both through their “dying form” and through the regular contact that would make them his “living Being” in the same manner as the fields and hills. As such, I read them as figuring experience that is elusive, disorganized, or obscure, not easily cognized and thus not transported in ideal, remembered form. And while the spots frame perceptions as they are first apprehended, in all their shiny newness, by contrast the “last dotage of a dying form” encourages an awareness toward things on the brink of perceptual extinction, asking for a wholly different kind of aesthetic sensitivity.

Thinking of this sensitivity only in relation to the “dying form” of the sheepfold may make it hard to identify as pleasure—rather than say, mourning or despair. But in the DC MS. 15 notebook in which Wordsworth drafted much of “Michael,” and interspersed with sections of the

---

28Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, 329. All references to drafts for “Michael” are to the Cornell edition, and cite the relevant page numbers.
poem, are multiple verse fragments that return to negligible sensations, as if trying to feel out an aesthetics of slightness that we can couple with Michael’s “pleasurable feeling” in the fields and hills that he barely notices, and in his looking at the sun and listening to the wind. In “Thou issueth from a fissure in the rock” the poet speaks to a trickle of water:

… upon the face
Of the steep crag diffus’d, thou dost flow down
Wide, weak and glimmering, and so thin withal
Thy course is like the brushing of a breeze
Upon a calm smooth lake. (Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800, 321)

The “weak and glimmering” image suggestively adumbrates MS. Y’s “glimmering residue of splendours past,” here imagined not through an attitude of defiance (“Nothing declind or faded”) but rather of subtle appreciation. The “wide,” “thin,” “diffus’d” stream closely resembles the dispersal of Michael’s feelings across the sweep of his land; and instead of delving into the “calm smooth lake” to find what is submerged within it as in The Prelude, the poet here is content to lightly brush its surface, minimally touching the present moment and no more. The sensory pleasures imagined in the fragment (and in its neighbors, which draw similarly faint images) seem just barely sensible, offering feeling for now but no endless deeps for future withdrawal. Reading these alongside “Michael”—just as Wordsworth was writing them alongside “Michael”—clarifies his project to develop an aesthetics of minimal perception. But where these images are offered on their own, “Michael” places faint perceptions in the context of loving attachment. The sensitivity to faint things encodes its own affective motive in the twofold meaning of “dotage,” from the passage quoted above: as with Michael’s “exceeding” love for Luke, “excessive love or fondness” offers pleasure even in weakness and failure.29

“Michael” imagines an aesthetic form that describes its own undoing, that essentially “declines” and “fades.” The one synonym for “form” that the poem uses, in referring to the burial ground as the “family mould,” signals this doubleness: on the one hand, “mould” denotes a

29 OED, “dotage.”
dissolution into decaying earth; on the other, a shaping of something into distinctiveness. Like Michael’s “living Being,” which is not bounded by his physical frame but rather spread out along the fields and hills, the forms we encounter in the poem are diffusive rather than concentrated. And recognizing Michael’s diffusion in life as prefiguring his literal dissolution into the “mould” of his land after death, we might read the “unspotty” forms in the poem—Michael’s body, the family “mould,” the fields and hills, and most of all the sheepfold—as forms of death, thinking back to Milton’s “shape … that shape had none / Distinguishable.” In the poem’s emphatic continuity it refuses to differentiate even between the living and the dead, creating in the sheepfold’s “covenantal” form an objective correlative to Burke’s contractual “partnership … between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” But “Michael” also recasts Burke’s conservative image as manifestly vulnerable in a way that Burke might find uncomfortable to contemplate. The sheepfold, in representing an intergenerational covenant, defers its completion to “those who are to be born” and thus is necessarily “unfinished.” Wordsworth adapts a figure of belonging (in the Old and New Testaments sheepfolds mark protection and religious membership) into one open to alterity.

This openness likewise characterizes the poem’s concept of selfhood. David Bromwich describes Michael’s lands as “an extension of himself” (5). But these are not the poem’s terms, in which the fields and hills are “his living Being, even more / Than his own Blood” (ll. 75–6). If anything Michael is an extension of them, and not the other way around. “Michael” dismantles the idea of a “private” self, a being ultimately inaccessible to others and defined by its distinctiveness from them. In drafts for the poem Wordsworth writes that it is “by the sovereignty” of endurable forms in nature that “affinities” are “preserv’d / Between all stages of the life of man” (328); this clearly prefigures Michael’s identification with his lands, and suggests that identity is essentially dependent on context. We can read “Michael” (the shepherd’s name) as a convenient shorthand for Michael’s identification with his lands, and suggests that identity is essentially dependent on context. We can read “Michael” (the shepherd’s name) as a convenient shorthand for

---

30 OED, “mould.”
for a bundle of similar feelings repeatedly produced by the external world, rather than as denoting a particular supervenient self. This implies that if others feel similarly towards Michael’s fields and hills, there would be no reason to describe them as distinctive from Michael.\textsuperscript{33}

Adela Pinch argues that emotion in the eighteenth century is “extravagant,” wandering from person to person.\textsuperscript{34} But Wordsworth shows something that is arguably even stranger, in which external objects mediate “personal” feelings and allow others to pick them up years later without any direct personal contact at all. This is what the poem offers to the reader in its opening invitation to turn into the hidden valley, and what the poet likewise suggests for the “youthful Poets, who among these hills / Will be my second self when I am gone” (ll. 38–9). This latter formulation has been read as aggressive egotism; but if the “self” is nothing more than a particular relationship to the external world, then the poet is hoping only that others feel a pleasure similar to his in the hills among which he dwells. And this pleasure is only available in these particular hills, beside Greenhead Gill; unlike the spots of time, which can be easily moved around, the sheepfold is finally untranslatable, a “you have to be there to see it” object that frustrates the critical attempt to displace it into far other contexts. (That no one has ever located the purported sheepfold makes the poem that much more frustrating.) “Michael” undermines its own status as a textual, meaning object, through illustrating the power of immediate, unknowing feeling apart from the imagination’s conversion of vivid impressions into portable cognitive property. The aesthetic pleasures that the

\textsuperscript{33}Bromwich argues that around the time Wordsworth wrote “Michael,” he made a startling discovery that “the link between one moment and another in a single mind could have the resonance, and oddly something also of the moral weight, of a relation between moments of two minds” (137–8). Yet for Bromwich the “mind” remains nevertheless absolutely singular; his account of Wordsworthian personal identity as “coherent and irreducible by analysis,” and having “the force of an imperative,” runs counter to the apparent feebleness of Michael’s self (x). Paul Fry describes the irreducibility of all things in Wordsworth’s poetry, arguing that Wordsworth’s abiding interest is in “ontic unity.” But where Fry’s attention to ontology leads him to compare the existence of humans with the existence of rocks and stones and trees, for example, I see Wordsworth as most interested in sensible being, even if in sensible being as barely differentiated from the insensible. His interest in how humans can be like rocks and stones and trees seems to me to be an interest in nascent sensibility—the faintest glimmerings of feeling that characterize habitual being in the world. Thus I see Wordsworth writing the poetry less “of what we are,” and more of “feeling what / Was to be felt,” that preeminently human quality in The Prelude Book 8. Paul H. Fry, Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are, Yale Studies in English (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

poem evokes are precisely those that cannot be picked out by the “beaconing” intensity of the spot of time, rather sticking residually to the environment that produces them and resisting any visible dislocation.

Thus in Michael’s sheepfold, and in the poem more generally, we find nothing like a spot of time: rather we are invited to take up a temporal relation to the world entirely different than the one that the spots of time create. The spots salvage certain familiar perceptions from general decay by dredging them up from the past in imagination and renovating them with the new coloring of far other feelings; Michael, by contrast, accepts familiar objects’ sensible ruin and finds pleasure in them nonetheless, a pleasure that is strengthened by the fastening of blind love. In “Michael” Wordsworth gestures at a mode of aesthetic experience produced by intimate, repeated contact with objects rather than by temporarily defamiliarizing them. This mode eludes an idea of the aesthetic as something definitely formed and endlessly meaningful—both of which characteristics intimate a necessary critical detachment—but it opens up the possibility of a sustained aesthetic enjoyment in what is immediately around us, through attending to the slighter feelings produced by continuing and repeated things.

“Michael” brings us to a strange place in Wordsworth’s imagination, one that critics have overlooked in their eagerness to read the sheepfold alongside other intensely charged forms in Wordsworth’s poetry. Here we see the poet dismantling many of what we think of as his characteristic poetic traits: the vividly-rendered images that give The Prelude its poetic power; not only the egotistical “lord and master” but even the idea of a distinctive self altogether; and the belief in the endless significance of common life. Wordsworth lets readers feel the “weak being” of the past in all its weakness—the long-enduring forms of Michael’s life will undergo “great changes” by the poem’s end, and we know that Michael himself will have no future lineage—and the result is a poem hauntingly open to failure, loss, and disorganization, and yet not wholly given over to these. Wordsworth shapes out a form of feeling that, in accepting its own decline, finds pleasure enough to carry on.
I want to conclude in circling back, briefly, to the narrator’s strange claim to tell a story “ungarnish’d with events”—and we might add, ungarnished with any spots as well. As a act of critical perversity I want to momentarily read “garnish” not in the sense of “to embellish” (although this is most likely how Wordsworth meant it), but rather in its etymological sense of “to fortify, defend,” only recently obsolete in Wordsworth’s time. This reading reveals the narrative shaping out of events in time, and the creation of vivid “spots” of experience that we remember years later, as acts of self-protection against the incursions of temporal decay. To produce a definite form is to seem to have wrested something permanent from the experience rapidly flowing away from us in time. But “Michael” imagines a life lived without these psychic supports, in which someone is cast upon the bare unknowing “pleasure which there is in life itself” and yet finds comfort enough in the “strength of love” to stay attached to a world in decline.

35 OED, “garnish.”
Chapter 2

How to Exist Where You Are:

A Lesson in Lotos-Eating

Ever let the fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home.

John Keats

Tennyson’s interest in recovering familiar sensations for poetic pleasure does not stem, as
Wordsworth’s does, from a prior commitment to represent the “simple produce of the common
day.” To the contrary his poems, especially those written in the 1830–3 period on which this
chapter focuses, often image fantastic or faraway places and describe famous historical figures and
battles: all the rare, sensational stuff which Wordsworth hoped to minimize in his own work. But
for all his trade in exotic imagery Tennyson shows a strong ambivalence towards the imagination’s
penchant to look elsewhere for its pleasures—“elsewhere” not in relation to a particular place
like Somersby or a particular set of objects like those found in “common life,” but in relation to
“here,” to wherever and whenever we are at a particular point. At times indulgent of this penchant,
Tennyson more often represents it as frankly exhausting, and he imagines the body—that thing
that is always “here”—as a site of resistance to the cultural mandate to pursue “something more”
for pleasure. In “The Lotos-Eaters, evoking the luxury of wasting time in listening to the “music”
of the heartbeat or breath, Tennyson moves far from Michael’s hardscrabble discipline to describe a land of plenty to be had all around us, wherever we are.

**Imaginative Imperialism**

For over thirty years critics have tried Tennyson as an “imperialist of the imagination.” To summarize their case: from a young age Tennyson’s sensibility seemed alienated from contemporary British life. In his early poetry he rarely depicts scenes from home; instead he imagines faraway places, filling them with details appropriated from his wide reading in travel literature. But for all his investment in exotic experiences, he subordinates these to bourgeois values. That is, Tennyson ultimately uses exotic imagery to consolidate his own white, male, British privilege rather than to reorient power towards the marginalized groups he finds so aesthetically appealing: he is the poetic prototype of the imperialist, venturing out to the periphery in order to profit the center. As Alan Sinfield alleges in the trial’s opening argument, for Tennyson “the poetic spirit is the advance guard of capitalism and imperialism, and cannot escape this involvement.” Subsequent critics, the most recent being David Riede, have developed or qualified Sinfield’s accusation, but the majority verdict returns the same: guilty as charged.¹

This chapter is not a deposition for the defense. Tennyson himself admitted a fascination with things remote ("The words ‘far, far away’ had always a strange charm for me") that is hard to read as politically innocent. And he did use exotic imagery for his own ideological convenience, as Sinfield accuses him of doing—this chapter is partly about one of the ways he did so. But his situation is complicated: what Sinfield and later critics miss is that Tennyson was also deeply critical of an imaginative bias towards the far away—albeit primarily on aesthetic rather than political grounds. This aesthetic critique is my subject.

Before British imperialism was the imagination, as both Sinfield and Riede note. That is, before "imperialism" became an explicit political construct in the mid-Victorian era, the groundwork was laid by an aesthetic ideology that emphasized the imagination’s preference for what lay apart from familiar experience: for the exotic, in the etymological sense of the word as demarcating what is outside. "Pleasure" as Keats’s epigraph to this chapter has it, "never is at home." While much of Tennyson’s early work implicitly urges Keats’s claim, roaming from Persia to Peru in a bid to attract readers, I take up a set of interrelated early poems that critically analyzes the attraction of the far away and counters it with a pleasure “fast-rooted,” “in its place” (“The Lotos-Eaters,” ll. 84, 81): “The Merman,” “The Mermaid,” and “The Sea-Fairies” in Poems, Chiefly Lyrical (1830), and “The Lotos-Eaters” in Poems (1832). In reforming aesthetic pleasure around the nearby rather than the remote these poems discredit imperialism after all, although not along the overtly political lines on which Sinfield and others would have them proceed. Rather, they criticize the psychology of empire. They proclaim “no more”: an end to acquisition and expansion; and even more broadly, an end to measuring the value of a life by its progress from its origins, by the distance it travels. Where these poems—“The Lotos-Eaters” in particular—have been read as signal instances of Tennyson’s imaginative imperialism, as “inevitably [taking] the tone of the dominant Orientalist discourse of his age” (Riede 71), I read them as trying to avoid the inevitable.


2Ctd. in Alfred Tennyson, The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher B. Ricks, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 1987), Vol 3, 197. All references to Tennyson’s poems are from Ricks’s edition.

64
They form a set of experiments that tried to dismantle the imperial imagination from within.

Before I get to Tennyson’s poetic experiments, I want to sketch out the context that makes them so experimental. The claim that “pleasure never is at home” was a commonplace: in aesthetic thought, in broader physiological discourse, and most especially in the travel literature Tennyson read so avidly as a young poet. And much depended on this commonplace. A textbook model of mind, such as that appealed to by John Young in his lectures on philosophy of mind at Belfast College, explained intellectual activity through just this idea of pleasure: “The mind of man is formed for activity, and delights in new sensations. His active spirit cannot rest on a point, but bounds forth, with an elastic spring, in quest of new observations. By this he is distinguished, in an eminent degree, from the lower animals.” For the mind to actively acquire knowledge, physiologists required some explanatory mechanism: that mechanism was the delight they posited in “new sensations,” in things unlike what had been encountered before. Identifying the mind’s “elastic spring” towards novelty with the imaginative faculty, writers described this faculty as essential not just to individual intellectual life but to culture at large. As a 1790 article in The European Magazine wonders, “without this internal spring of imagination, without this extension of fancy beyond the present bounds of objective reality, … what else would be left to keep mankind in motion, or to support the hurry and bustle of their affairs?” This spring “beyond … present bounds” is an early formulation of imaginative imperialism, in which we can already see an explicit connection between certain aesthetic, or sensory, experiences—experiences of new sensations—and the broader cultural values of accumulation, progress, and commerce (“the hurry and bustle of their affairs”).

The imagination’s bent towards novelty takes on a more particular role in the travel books which Tennyson read, as the motive force behind exploration. Washington Irving’s Columbus, for example, travels not for imperial gain, but rather because of his “ardent and impatient desire to

---

break away from the limits of the old world, and launch into the unknown”—that is, because of the “spring of imagination” being wound so tight.\(^5\) With his imaginative ardor Columbus is an ambassador from a broader Western culture of curiosity. In physiology the “spring of imagination” distinguished humans over “lower animals,” as above. But in travel literature it discriminated more finely, across racial and national lines. Thus Claude Étienne Savary, whose *Letters on Egypt* Tennyson read by 1827, describes “Europeans” as “continually tormented by a wish to know and act,” and even conditioned by the northern climate to desire novelty: “The Frenchman, born under an ever varying sky, is continually receiving new impressions, which keep his mind as continually awake; he is active, impatient, and agitated like the atmosphere in which he exists; while the Egyptian, feeling the same heat, the same sensation, two thirds of the year, is idle, solemn, and patient.” Constantly active, Savary’s Westerners are also harassed by “lassitude”: “This is a torment reserved for those who, unable to moderate the violence of their desires, or satisfy their unbounded wants, are weary everywhere, and exist only where they are not.”\(^6\) Savary describes a logical conundrum similar to the one Alice encounters in Wonderland: jam there, and jam there, but never jam here. If you’re after “new impressions” wherever you are is less attractive than wherever you haven’t yet been, since newness wears off with time. This is the imaginative imperialist’s fate; if pleasure never is at home, the imagination must always exist elsewhere. There is always, as Ulysses hoarsely exhorts his men, a “newer world” out there.\(^7\)

To sum up: physiology described a pleasure in new or exotic sensations as essential to mental development, and the travel literature that Tennyson read drew on this model of mind to reinforce Western claims to cultural superiority. The exploratory ardor to acquire new sensations was repeated in a finer tone by Tennyson’s closest friend Arthur Henry Hallam, with his poetic

\(^5\)Washington Irving, *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (London: John Murray, 1828), 70. Tennyson read Irving’s biography shortly after it was published in 1828.

\(^6\)Claude Étienne Savary, *Letters on Egypt* (London: J. Robinson, 1787), 138–9, 146–7. We can see in accounts like Savary’s how imperialism was insidiously justified as psychological destiny.

enthusiasm to “become something new, to add a mode of being to those we have experienced.” These influences certainly shaped Tennyson’s early sense of the “charm” of the far away, and made him aware of the cultural assumptions wrapped up in this “charm,” as we will see. Yet if travel narratives modeled the imperialist imagination for Tennyson, as Sinfield and Riede claim, they also provided the material for him to critique that imagination, by depicting an alternative basis for the pleasures enjoyed by “savages”—and this Tennyson’s critics do not acknowledge. Westerners’ supposedly different physiology blocks their access to Eastern enjoyments: “a monotony which, to a European, would be death, is delight to an Egyptian” (146). Behold Savary’s “Turk,” smoking “his long jasmin pipe”:

… thoughtless, in tranquil apathy, he smokes the fume down, void of desire, void of ambition; his calm passions never cast one curious look towards futurity: that restless activity by which we are tormented, and which is the soul of all our knowledge, of all our works, is to him unknown; … his life, to us, seems a long slumber; ours, to him, one continual state of intoxication; but, while we are ever pursuing happiness which ever eludes our grasp, he peaceably enjoys the good that nature gives, and each day brings, without troubling himself concerning the morrow. (51–2)

In place of the propulsive forces—desire, ambition, curiosity—that orient the European body to an elsewhere, Savary’s Turk has “void.” This emptiness is the passage’s dominant note, echoed in its language of “thoughtless” unknowing and “apathy.” Savary, like many other Orientalist writers, patronizingly frames Egyptians’ “peaceable” enjoyments negatively, with Europeans’ “restless activity” acting as the standard measure from which other cultures can only deviate.9

Yet despite their patronizing—and worse, exploitative—attitude towards other cultures, accounts like Savary’s nevertheless helped Tennyson regard as contingent what elsewhere was treated as “natural”: humans’ supposed fitness for innovation and progress.10 To read Poems,
Chiefly Lyrical (1830) and Poems (1832) in relation these accounts is to recognize just how strongly their evocations of Oriental pleasure resonated with Tennyson. Monotony, emptiness, a blank future, a long slumber: these haunt Tennyson’s early poetry, revealing his persistent attraction to inactive modes of being. In some cases he codes these images negatively, as marking abject misery—that is, he subordinates them to the bourgeois value of productive employment. But in the early poems I consider he reclaims inaction as simply pleasurable. Staged in, on, or next to the sea, the mer-poems and “The Lotos-Eaters” take back sites of travel or imminent departure for the purposes of poetic languor, and in doing so protest the demand to be constantly in motion. I read these poems in the line of the “celebration of anti-modern exoticism” that Saree Makdisi identifies in Romantic literature and especially in the poetry of Byron, who had the greatest influence on Tennyson’s early verse.¹¹ Like the works Makdisi addresses, these poems of Tennyson’s can be read as challenging early imperialist thinking through the unlikely strategy of imagining exotic zones that resist modernization’s steady incorporation of alterity.

The mer-poems and “The Lotos-Eaters” follow this logic: they each posit an exotic space where the exotic holds little imaginative sway, thus proving—as Makdisi would say, following Edward Said—the difficulty of thinking outside of contemporary imperialist paradigms. These poems engage a conflict between an imaginative projection outwards and a longing to stay in one place. In deciding for the latter Tennyson shifts away from acquisitive plots of desire and ambition, writing in their stead narratives organized around blank, eventless stretches of lived experience. These are moments in which the self is not defined by its imperial reach, its growing extension through time and space—it exists where it is, inasmuch as such a thing is possible. Tennyson attempts to write a counterhistory to supplement the dominant Western histories of action and

my argument that Tennyson subverts the acquisitive psychology behind empire and capitalism, but not from the revolutionary motives that Sinfield would have him employ. Rather Tennyson undermines the call to “something more” from a reactionary desire to recover a pleasure in minimal, familiar feelings. Isobel Armstrong, Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poets and Politics (New York: Routledge, 1993), 36.

acquisition; the mer-poems and “The Lotos-Eaters” explore experiences that are devalued within Western culture, that occur in the negative space of progressive narratives. And in reworking the basis of aesthetic experience Tennyson creates a new vocabulary of aestheticism, a development which I show to be deeply rooted in his resistance to the imperial imagination.

**Night-Bats and Sea-Fairies**

From an early age Tennyson wrote poetry as psychological portraiture, and on a cursory reading his model of what we might call “mental health” would seem to require the imaginative roaming described above. In “Ulysses” for example, a poem Tennyson framed approvingly as giving his “feeling about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life,” we see an imaginative imperialist in rhetorical action. Gray-haired and yet still vigorous in body and mind, Ulysses finely realizes the person who exists only where he is not: “Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough / Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move” (ll. 19–21). The “gleam” of the untraveled indicates the light of Ulysses’ gaze pointing where he wants to be: anywhere outside the “arch” of the already-experienced. What he has already “seen and known” serves only to frame what is yet unfamiliar; this prioritizing of new over old is most evident when Ulysses’ listening audience and his immediate surroundings at Ithaca’s port emerge in the monologue only as afterthoughts. In “Ulysses” Tennyson evokes the imaginative imperialist’s inner life, in which the world is barren unless it hold out “something more, / A bringer of new things” (ll. 27-28). And as Tennyson builds out this acquisitive mindset, he also shows his sensitivity to the cultural work it performs. Ulysses’ desire for “something more” marks him out as consummate capitalist and imperialist—he sets out in search of “profits” and “a newer world” together (ll. 1, 56). Yet even in this strident monologue, with its ringing endorsement of just the mentality Sinfield and Riede criticize in Tennyson’s poetry, we get a hint of the poet’s hesitancy. Ulysses’

---

metaphor for the life he rejects in Ithaca—"To rust unburnished, not to shine in use"—depicts in one image the sword of battle laid by and the capitalist anathema of money not put out to interest (l. 23). That Tennyson marries the two strongly suggests his awareness of the predatory instincts of capitalism. The old warrior's habitual violence spreads through his speech, coloring even the apparently laudable "desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought" (ll. 30–32). The mechanism behind intellectual progress, the pursuit of new sensations and new ideas, merges imperceptibly with the larger cultural forces of early capitalism and proto-imperialism.

That Tennyson considered Ulysses (for all his violent impulses) a model of mental health, seems supported by a number of his early poetic figures with no corresponding orientation towards the far away. Tennyson was fascinated with people who lingered, lazied, or did nothing at all, but it was a guilty fascination. Ulysses' most famous counterpart in this regard is Mariana: while the former strains to be leagues away from wherever he is, well over the horizon, the latter can hardly bring herself to get out of bed; and while Ulysses "will drink / Life to the lees," gulping down whatever it has to offer, Mariana finds even the "sparrow's chirrup on the roof" an unwelcome distraction from her all-consuming misery ("Ulysses," ll. 6–7; "Mariana," l. 73). For Ulysses, who trains his attention on the remote "gleam" of the "untravelled world," Tennyson has dozens of figures who dwell in total shadow, in a "night of wretchedness," a "waste of darkness," a "dark gulf of woe" ("Remorse," ll. 9, 29; "Written by an Exile of Bassorah," l. 3). In their cases the absence of light marks both their psychological state (an absence of active curiosity or desire "to shine in use") and its repercussions (the darkness of punishment). They recapitulate many of the characteristics of Savary's Turk; their lives are defined by emptiness, wasted opportunity, and the absence of any hope of change. But the Turk found his blank state to be a "delight," while Tennyson's poems interpret the same as torment. We are looking at this state through "Western" eyes, so to speak, so that inaction is perceived as pain. Tennyson's frequent recourse to situations like these—in poems which include the histrionically bleak titles "Remorse," "I wander in darkness and sorrow," "The Grave of a Suicide," "Unhappy Man, why wander there?," and "The Deserted House"—indicates
his interest in developing a poetics of inaction and empty experience. But it seems that he struggled
to do this apart from a value system that privileged Ulysses’ heroic pursuit of something more, and
that accordingly consigned do-nothings to moral perdition.

Yet there is a poem called “Perdidi Diem,” which Tennyson wrote around 1830 and did not publish, that reworks this imagery. It, too, takes place in darkness, and like “Ulysses” and “Mariana” deals with the daily passage from day to night, but it suggests that the guilty suffering of those in the dark is not endemic to their state but rather projected into it from a perspective that looks for progress. Here we see the possibility that inaction could be a source of real pleasure, as Tennyson performs a kind of psychological history by imagining an early state in which the mind was less prone to seek out difference:

And thou hast lost a day! Oh mighty boast!
Dost thou miss one day only? I have lost
A life, perchance an immortality;
I never lived a day, but daily die,
I have no real breath;
My being is a vacant worthlessness,
A carcase in the coffin of this flesh,
Pierced through with loathly worms of utter Death.
My soul is but the eternal mystic lamp,
Lighting that charnel damp,
Wounding with dreadful rays that solid gloom,
And shadowing forth the unutterable tomb,
Making a ‘darkness visible’
Of that which without thee we had not felt
As darkness, dark ourselves and loving night,
Night-bats into the filtering crevices
Hooked, clinging, darkness-fed, at ease:
Night-owls whose organs were not made for light. (ll. 1–18, emphasis in original)

Not until Hopkins wakes and feels the fell of dark some fifty-five years later does English literature produce a sweater, more suffocating poem. Tennyson’s image of a speaker metaphorically buried alive makes his point: on a ledger which marks only the productive use of time, a “life” of lost days looks just like “death.” But gradually the poem’s register inverts, ironically reframing its initial evaluation of action. The vocabulary of waste and loss—both capital offenses under Weber’s
Protestant ethic—transforms into one of “ease.” From carcasses we come to creatures who are “darkness-fed,” at home in a night which succors and nurtures them. Suffering is wrought not by this darkness but by the “malignant light” (l. 22) and “dreadful rays” which “wound” in creating a difference where none had been felt before. Only with this light comes the knowledge that what had felt like ease was, in fact, “wasted” time, time that should have been used productively. Tennyson reverses the priority usually given to day over night, picturing an originary darkness which is unnaturally invaded by the “mystic lamp” of Christian conscience. Thus while the poem begins in mourning the loss of day, by its end we see that the true loss is the loss of night, of a prior pleasure in rest and empty time.

Contemporary racial theories, which understood primitive peoples to be types of early humans, would have encouraged the idea that a “savage” pleasure in vacant inertia was essentially prior to a “civilized” curiosity. And so, inspired in part by Savary’s descriptions of Egyptian languor (“I savour of the Egyptian and adore / Thee, venerable dark!”), Tennyson uses the idea of an originary delight in stasis to write his way towards a poetry in which pleasure can exist where it is, unaccountable to any demand to achieve “something more” (“Ode: O Bosky Brook,” ll. 83–84). “Perdidi Diem” exposes the assumption of humans’ fitness for activity and change to be just that—an assumption, which can be dismissed at will. In reframing inaction not as “loss” or “vacant worthlessness,” but as “ease,” the poem critiques an Enlightenment understanding of life as measured by accumulation and progress. For the mind’s “spring” towards the exotic Tennyson substitutes the “hooks” that fix his night creatures in their “filtering crevices.” And once the gleam of the far away fades, a different kind of poetry emerges. In “Ode: O Bosky Brook,” a contemporary unpublished poem, Tennyson bids farewell to a daylight empire “with lordly cities and with towers, / … with the gliding white of pregnant sails”—all this the stuff of his overtly “imperial” poetry—and turns to “rare sound, spare light” as offering its own aesthetic delight (ll. 100-101, 109).

Tennyson most directly engages a pleasure independent from the far away in the interrelated poems, “The Merman,” “The Mermaid,” and “The Sea-Fairies,” from Poems, Chiefly Lyrical (1830),
and “The Lotos-Eaters,” from *Poems* (1832). These poems all visit an archetypal scene of travel—the sea, which functions in Tennyson’s early poetry as the space across which the questing imagination projects itself. They all inhabit a similar mythos, with journeying mariners and their alluring marine counterparts, sea-sirens (or Lotos-eaters). And they all take up a similar problem in exploring the poetic resources of an imagination unhitched from the drive towards a newer world.

If “Perdidi Diem” whispers the pleasures of “loving night,” these lyrics celebrate them with full voice: here we see Tennyson’s verbal fluency reach its high tide, having burst the narrow bounds of Mariana’s staccato refrain and similarly unchecked by Ulysses’ later rhetorical restraint. The attitude of guilt that framed earlier accounts of unproductive time gives way to a sprawling embrace of darkness as offering its own ecstasy. The mer-people are poets who gladly and wilfully prefer the dark to the light. Like Mariana, who only opens her curtains “when thickest darkness did trance the sky” (l. 18), they keep to the seabed at day and surface in a “magic night” with “neither moon nor star” (“The Merman,” ll. 21, 23). And in their darkness, in the underworld beneath imperialism’s chartered realms, they sing with an aural intensity unprecedented thus far in Tennyson’s poetry: they “carol aloud,” “sit and sing the whole of the day,” “fill the sea-halls with a voice of power,” “call aloud in the dreamy dells, / Call to each other and whoop and cry / All night, merrily, merrily” (“The Mermaid,” l. 52; “The Merman,” ll. 9, 10, 25–7). Even visual detail, never Tennyson’s strong suit, is subsumed in aurality: “And I should look like a fountain of gold / Springing alone / With a shrill inner sound” (“The Mermaid,” ll. 18–20, emphasis mine).

These mer-people sing to no other end than to please themselves, and Tennyson’s poems embrace this undirected, seemingly-empty existence—indeed its emptiness is one of its charms. In the amphitheater of the “hollow-hung,” “hollow sphere of the sea,” song can echo all the louder (“The Merman,” l. 38; “The Mermaid,” l. 54). These are some of the most striking representations of vocal power in all of Tennyson’s work; that he places them in the context of an aimless, repetitive life emphasizes how freeing he found this idea to be for his own lyrical gifts.

Tennyson’s verbal playfulness spins out even more exuberantly in “The Sea-Fairies,” in which the merfolk tease some mariners to abandon their onward course:
Whither away, whither away, whither away? fly no more.
Whither away wi’ the singing sail? Whither away wi’ the oar?
Whither away from the high green field, and the happy blossoming shore?
Weary mariners, hither away,
One and all, one and all,
Weary mariners come and play;
We will sing to you all the day;
Furl the sail and the foam will fall
From the prow! One and all
Furl the sail! Drop the oar!
Leap ashore!
Know danger and trouble and toil no more.
Whither away wi’ the sail and the oar?
Drop the oar,
Leap ashore,
Fly no more!
Whither away wi’ the sail? Whither away wi’ the oar? (ll. 7–24, 1830 version)

Tennyson’s verse is so self-involved that the sea-fairies’ call to “drop the oar” is gratuitous: this language isn’t going anywhere. The limited stock of consonant and vowel sounds (“whither,” “wi’ the,” “away,” “weary”) advertizes a pleasure to be gotten out of little rather than out of the “something more” that the mariners are off to discover. “Whither” is repeated until it is leached of semantic content, while “the high green field, and the happy blossoming shore” bloom all the brighter for the waste of words that surrounds them. In catching the vivid colors of the nearby we arrive at the perspective inverse to Ulysses’: where for Ulysses “untravelled” margins gleam out against a dull, familiar center, for the sea-fairies (as opposed to sea-farers) “hither” shines brighter than the unknown “whither.” In classical literature the sirens promise new knowledge; in Tennyson’s poems they offer nearly the opposite: a release from the drive to seek out something more. The imperative to pursue knowledge, so insistent in Tennyson’s earlier accounts of heroic exploration, is ignored: as “know” withers to “no,” the sea-fairies mark the limits of the ne plus ultra beyond which Ulysses was determined to sail. Their motto is “no more”; they refuse to go elsewhere, rather choosing to remain with what they already have.
“The Lotos-Eaters”

“No more” is likewise the motto of another, more well-known group of Tennysonian figures: the mariners turned Lotos-eaters, whose Choric Song begins and ends with the refrain, “we will return no more.” Written at least a year after the mer-poems and reflecting further thinking on the mind’s attraction to the far away, “The Lotos-Eaters” is Tennyson’s most extended experiment to curtail the imagination’s vagrant tendencies and to give it a home. Crucially, the poem focuses not on “alien” experiences like those of the mer-people or even the Lotos-eaters, but on the mariners’ feelings. That is, it does not project an experience that is physiologically “other,” or even fantasize about “going native,” as some readings of the poem have it. It tests a hypothesis: what if the mariners took the merfolks’ advice, and stopped short in their wanderings? What feelings, what experiences, what plot, might emerge absent an overweening curiosity about somewhere else?

Although “The Lotos-Eaters” ultimately trades in “something more” for “no more,” it begins in the Ulyssean mode, with Tennyson appealing to the imagination’s forward trajectory before he corrects that trajectory. “Courage!” Ulysses points to an unknown island in the distance, as a series of direction words (“toward,” “shoreward,” “unto”) orient the mariners towards an elsewhere. Visual details predominate in the first descriptions of Lotos-land, and an exploratory eye canvasses its streams, three mountains, inland dale. If this were Columbus’s expedition, we’d expect the mariners to reconnoiter the island, to make notes on the inhabitants, and then to move on to whatever new adventure might await them elsewhere—which is not altogether unlike what Homer’s Odyssey has them do. But Tennyson has other designs.

The initial lure of the unknown turns out to be merely bait. What the mariners don’t know is that in setting foot on the island they have entered into a poetic laboratory, so to speak,

---

13In the 1842 version, the final phrase is revised to “We will not wander more.” On a project of return rather than of discovery, the mariners might seem exempt from the thing that I argue Tennyson is critiquing: the imaginative bias towards faraway novelty. But in their drive homeward they merely complete Sinfield’s imperial model: “the poet throws his imagination out to the periphery, plants himself as securely as he can there, adapting all that he finds to his project, and brings back to the mother country a rich hoard . . .” (50). By arresting this drive, Tennyson short-circuits the imaginative trade Sinfield describes.
and have become test subjects in a psychological experiment. First, they are given a mind-altering
drug, the Lotos plant. Whatever desire they had to explore the exotic paradise dissolves under the
Lotos’s influence: instead of continuing to look around, they “[sit] them down upon the yellow
sand,” content to stay where they are (l. 37). Critics have typically described the drug’s effect to
lie in enervating the mariners’ will, reading their sluggishness as a surrender to indolence.14 But
this is more of a sit-in than just a sit-down; the one thing the mariners don’t seem to lack is will.
“We will return no more,” “we will no longer roam,” “we will not wander more”: the Choric
Song is a drawn-out protest in which the mariners repeatedly refuse the “something more” logic
which would impel them onward. Their reiterated refusals indicate just how insistent the mentality
they’re resisting can be. A “newer world,” a promise of transformed future selves, beckon at the
margins of the poem, but the mariners defiantly avert their gaze.

The island mirrors the disinterest in transformation effected in its inhabitants. It is “a land,”
in a spine-tingling line, “where all things always seemed the same!” (l. 24). “The Lotos-Eaters”
shifts its focus to continuity rather than difference; this inversion of background and foreground
is what gives the poem its eerie quality. Sun and moon share the sky, obviating even the basic
distinction between night and day. This is not to say that Lotos-land is timeless, but rather that on
the island time no longer serves as a measure of difference or change. Like the tropical existence
later rejected in “Locksley Hall” because in it “earth should stand at gaze like Joshua’s moon
in Ajalon,” experience seems static in “The Lotos-Eaters” because it no longer heeds the logic
of progressive development (“Locksley Hall,” l. 180). As what Tennyson called the “lazy” “no
rhyme of ‘land’ and ‘land’ ” indicates, Lotos-land is a place where things seem coincidental with
themselves through time, rather than differentiated into distinct temporal parts.15

---

14 Nearly everyone has read the poem in this way. See for example Isobel Armstrong; James Eli Adams, Dandies
and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity (Cornell University Press, 1995); Christopher Decker, “Tennyson’s Limitations,”
University Press, 2009), 57–75; and Riede. But Tennyson is trying to dismantle the premises by which inaction is coded
as shirking a normative demand to stay on the move and be productive.

15 Ctd. in Tennyson, The Poems of Tennyson, Vol 1, 468.
This shift in focus transforms the poem’s narrative structure. “The Lotos-Eaters” begins in a Homeric mode, on the scene of a detour, as the mariners’ return to Ithaca is deferred by a storm that blows them off course. As readers of the poem know, this disembarking at Lotos-land is not an end full-stop, but merely a pause on the way. As such, the subplot of the mariners’ marooning there neatly resembles what Peter Brooks terms an “arabesque” of desire—a detour from the final end, a feint at a less satisfactory ending which through its very unsatisfactoriness keeps desire in play. “The Lotos-Eaters” spins away from epic journey into the “wanton wreathings intricate” of Spenserian romance, with Lotos-land drawing from the wandering isle of the Bower of Bliss. Like the Bower, Lotos-land’s point lies partly in its pointlessness, its curling away from any straightforward itinerary. Both of these patterns—epic, romance—lead us to expect the mariners’ byway, their digression at Lotos-land, eventually to rejoin the highway, the larger line of the quest forward.

But this is precisely not how Lotos-land works within Tennyson’s poem. What should be a temporary berth becomes a permanent home, and what should be a plot feint away from the path towards Ithaca turns out to be no feint at all, but real ending. Brooks’s dynamism of plot verges dangerously close to stasis—an arabesque that curls in on itself endlessly, no longer furthering any direction. The poem gradually closes down the possibility that the mariners might go on to Ithaca, and so releases them from an end-oriented mentality in which the significance of the present is bestowed by a beckoning future. In “The Lotos-Eaters” Ulysses’ pointed finger drops to his side,

16Brooks, Reading for the Plot; Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, ed. A. C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita, and Toshiyuki Suzuki (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 2.12.53.9. Putting Brooks’s account in similar, possibly more historically appropriate terms, we could compare the mariners’ pause at the island to one of the temporary “discharges” Nicholas Dames isolates as the “peculiar power of the novel,” a moment of “relaxation” which pulls against the “excitation” of plot’s drive to final closure. Percy G. Adams argues that travel literature in particular provided popular novelists with models of digression, in which the need to “follow an itinerary” was balanced against deviations from “the main route.” Nicholas Dames, The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Percy G. Adams, Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 206.

and the poem tacks away from an elsewhere which will fill the empty here and now with meaning. The large-scale narratives of process and completion that surround the poem—the hints of erotic consummation in the mariners’ attainment of the “sunset-flush’d” isle, the journey homeward, the images of organic growth and decay, and even the musical references that seem to gesture at melodic complication and resolution—are thwarted by an insistence on remaining put, so that forces of progress sweep around “The Lotos-Eaters” only to leave it undisturbed, like the “languid air” that blows the Lotos dust “round and round the spicy downs” in directionless futility (ll. 5, 149). As the deftly-woven Spenserian stanza frays into the looser Choric Song, we feel that the mariners have really and truly gone “off the grid,” left recognizable narrative patterns behind.\footnote{Tennyson’s use of the Spenserian stanza to open his poem is significant, given its history as a form that mediates between a call to action and a longing to linger. Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* and Thomson’s *Castle of Indolence* exert the strongest influence along these lines, with Keats’s *The Eve of St. Agnes* acting more indirectly. Byron, another major influence on Tennyson’s use of the form, reworks the stanza to facilitate Childe Harold’s restless roaming from place to place. In developing the Choric Song, which partly draws from the languorous Spenserian alexandrine, Tennyson ultimately pulls his verse away from both of these patterning influences.}

The mariners’ refusal to “wander more” stems from an awareness of the fraud underlying a Ulyssean journey onward. Where Ulysses fills the last hours of his life with “new things,” the mariners note the pointlessness of accumulation when “death is the end of life” and “all things ripen towards the grave” (ll. 86, 96).\footnote{Of course Ulysses is also privy to this knowledge: following Dante’s *Inferno*, the journey he forecasts in his monologue comes after he has already reached his purported destination. In their way “Ulysses” and “The Lotos-Eaters” represent divergent responses to the same dilemma. Ulysses holds his heroic resolve to discover “a newer world” despite his realization that no destination will offer the fulfillment he seeks.} They mean this not just in a tautological sense—death by definition marks life’s term—but with a darker instinct for life’s purpose. This far-off destination, to which we refer the meaning of the empty present, is itself just as empty: it’s turtles all the way down.\footnote{For a poet who was self-avowedly obsessed with the promise of immortality, Tennyson’s attention to the emptiness of death is startling. As others have noted, it shows Lucretius’s influence. *De Rerum Natura*’s largely negative definition of pleasure, as what is left behind after the removal of pain, is likewise significant for the kinds of minimal pleasure Tennyson tries to describe.} This recognition explodes the essential fiction which a successful narrative must sustain, and which Brooks explains in discussing Freud’s death drive as

a dynamic model that structures ends (death, quiescence, nonnarratability) against beginnings … in a manner that necessitates the middle as detour, as struggle toward
the end under the compulsion of imposed delay. ... The model proposes that we live in order to die, hence that the intentionality of plot lies in its orientation toward the end even while the end must be achieved only through detour. (238)

“We live in order to die”: the mariners know this, and what has been read as their suicidal impulse to close the gap between life’s beginning and end is really a refusal to differentiate what comes in between. They reject the understanding of life as a journey measured by the distance a person travels from her origins. “Our island home”—the site of significance and ultimate belonging—“is far beyond the wave” (ll. 41–42). This “home” has been variously taken to denote Ithaca, England, or the Lotos-land itself. But there is another way to understand this phrase, as setting up a structural problem: for people who “exist only where they are not,” home is always elsewhere, “beyond the wave.” This is the mariners’ reason to “no longer roam,” to give up the illusory project of trying to fill up what contemporary writers described as “the vacuity of time.”

Once experience is no longer oriented towards a faraway “whither,” what does it look like? Tennyson would have had plenty of speculative answers to choose among from writers who wondered, as he did, what life would be like “without hope of change” (“Mariana,” l. 29). Most agreed that it would be unpleasant:

From the hope and expectation of joys yet unexperienced, arise the desire of life, and the efforts to preserve it. As every day brings forth something new to us, we view its approach with pleasure. But, were the present state of nature one undistinguished uniform assemblage of the same objects, these hopes and pleasures could not exist. The journey of life, short as it is, would then become tedious, and present no other prospect than that of a dull unmeaning void.

---

21 For this phrase see Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present, ed. Chris Vanden Bossche, Joel J Brattin, and D. J. Trela (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). My reading of the poem resists Cornelia Pearsall’s argument that “The Lotos-Eaters” is a transformative narrative following the mariners’ change from “men of Ithaca” to “brother mariners” defined by their comrades rather than their families. Although some shift in identity does take place from the poem’s beginning to its end, I see the poem as regretting rather than embracing the demand for self-transformation. Cornelia D. J. Pearsall, Tennyson’s Rapture: Transformation in the Victorian Dramatic Monologue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

22 Edmund Rack, “Rashness of Censuring the Laws of Creation,” Literary Magazine and British Review 12 (April 1794), 293. For similar accounts which might have been familiar to Tennyson, see Reid, Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man Essay VIII, Chapter II; or Knight, An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste, Part III, Chapter III.
By now the assumptions encoded in this passage should be familiar to us: that pleasure and significance fundamentally depend on an orientation towards things “yet unexperienced.” Without the possibility of something new—or, as in the mariners’ case, without the orientation towards novelty that makes that possibility salient—existence would become unbearable. But as we have seen, similar descriptions of life without the prospect of difference appeared in travel literature, and not as giving pain, but pleasure. As Savary writes, “a monotony, which, to an European would be death, is delight to an Egyptian” (146). Assertions like these undermined for Tennyson the general claim that an imaginative bent towards the metaphorically untraveled was essential to pleasure. In “The Lotos-Eaters” the mariners abandon the attitude of expectation and willingly confine themselves to the island’s limits, to something like “one undistinguished uniform assemblage of the same objects.” Then, Tennyson probes the aesthetic possibilities in the empty experience which ensues.

As the mariners “cease from wanderings” after new objects, their experience thins down to minimal, repetitive sensations. Key readings of the poem have fundamentally mistaken this, tending to describe Lotos-land as a sensory paradise and the mariners as giving in to sensual indulgence. But actually they go to the opposite extreme: “Only to hear and see the far-off sparkling brine, / Only to hear were sweet, stretch’d out beneath the pine” (ll. 143–144, emphasis mine). Preferring the less of just hearing the sea over the more of both hearing and seeing it, the mariners draw near to a limit case of physiological experience. They become like Condillac’s hypothetical statue, their minds occupied by only one sensation. For physiologists such a state would test the boundaries of sentience. As James Mill explains in 1829:

> It has been said, that if we had but one sensation, and that uninterrupted, it would be as if we had no sensation at all …. We know that the air is continually pressing upon our bodies. But, the sensation being continual, without any call to attend to it, we lose,

---

from habit, the power of doing so. The sensation is as if it did not exist.\textsuperscript{24}

Mill goes on to place this and other similarly continuous sensations among a “class of feelings” which go “forgotten” amidst more changeful sensations. What is continuous or steadily repeated fades into something like nonexistence: sensations which are no longer sensible, the occurrence of which is indistinguishable from nonoccurrence.

Although parts of “The Lotos-Eaters” describe a sensory feast of “amber light” and “purple hill,” the mariners seem content to dine on bread and water—or rather, the Lotos-plant, which for all practical purposes is the same thing. Their eating it ushers them into a sensory state attuned to something like Mill’s class of minimal feelings. Like the seeing and hearing of the “sparkling brine,” the mariners’ sensations are repetitive: they watch “the crisping ripples on the beach” or “the emerald-color’d water falling,” hear “the downward stream” or “the dewy echoes calling” (ll. 106, 141, 99, 139). Mostly they listen to a music which suffuses the island and which is the primary source of their pleasure there. But this is no symphony, nor even \textit{The Tempest}’s tantalizing airs. The music that charms the mariners issues from their own “beating heart[s]” and from the languorous “breathing” which sounds continually around the island: “All day the wind breathes low with mellower tone; / Thro’ every hollow cave and alley lone” (ll. 146–7). In heartbeats and a breath blowing through a “cave” and “alley” that mimic the mouth and throat of human respiration, we find sensory impressions that could not be less like the exotic ones that have been read into the poem. The mariners’ sensations are not “outside” anything; rather, they are as “inside” as it gets, inside the body. Nor are they “exotic” in the sense of being foreign or rare: they are entirely commonplace. In evoking their “music” Tennyson sketches out an aesthetic subsistence independent of anything remote or hard to get, and returns imaginative pleasure to the one place that is always “here” no matter where we are—the body.

“The Lotos-Eaters”’ repeated recourse to sensations—the continuous murmur of ocean or stream, the thrum of the heart or sigh of the wind—that are usually imperceptible amid the

\textsuperscript{24}James Mill, \textit{Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind} (London: Baldwin & Cradock, 1829), 32.
of other impressions, should revise our understanding of the mariners’ apparent will to blissful ignorance. For all of these sensations are ones which fail to register if anything “more interesting” is around, as Mill says (32): it is only by removing themselves from the hope of change that the mariners might be able to feel what they feel at all. They do not plunge themselves into oblivion for its own sake, forcibly evacuating all lived experience. Rather, the music they choose to listen to marks all the “forgotten” sensations which are buried in active life. It flows in the negative space of narrative, in stretches of time in which nothing much happens. The most extensive description of Lotos-land’s music is a study in subtlety:

There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
Or night-dews on still waters between walls
Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass;
Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,
Than tir’d eyelids upon tir’d eyes…. (ll. 46–51)

This music plays at the limits of sensibility: could the mariners really hear something softer than rose petals falling on grass, than night-dews passing onto still waters? These are events so attenuated as to be indistinguishable from non-events. Their happening makes no difference, just as a drop of dew condensing on a body of water does not leave even a ripple behind. Like the “rare sound, spare light” which Tennyson praises above, on Lotos-land the mariners enjoy a sensory slightness. Their “half-shut eyes,” with “half-dropt eyelids still” act like the night-bats’ “filtering crevices” to temper novel stimulation (ll. 100, 135). And the sensations that filter through not only make no demands on the attention: paradoxically, they seem to only be accessible through inattention. The island’s music lies on the spirit more gently “than tir’d eyelids upon tir’d eyes”: it is not by keeping the eyes open, that signal instance of paying attention, that the mariners hear it, but by letting go,

25In this Lotos-land parts company with its predecessors in romance, such as Spenser’s Bower of Bliss, adorned “with all varietie” (2.12.59.9), or Thomson’s Castle of Indolence, in which “whatever sprightly juice or tasteful Food / On the green Bosom of this Earth are found.” James Thomson, The Castle of Indolence (London: A. Millar, 1748), 1.34.3–4).
unfocusing.\textsuperscript{26} Wasting time, Tennyson intimates—paying no attention to its passing—may provide unlooked-for pleasures which could not register in a more crowded, productive life.

In describing the “music” of forgotten feelings, Tennyson invites a reading of his own hyper-musical poem as structured by minimal, near-empty experience. And in this reading we can see him stress-testing the very constructs by which we try to make aesthetic objects mean. Tennyson doesn’t suggest that the slight feelings he takes up in his poem are somehow deeply significant after all; he doesn’t try to fill up the “spaced out” condition of the stranded mariners. In fact the island’s acknowledged emptiness seems to form part of its attraction: “In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined” (l. 154, emphasis mine). But it is curious how much our sense of this hollowness comes from an automatic identification of redundancy with unmeaning. A “land” that rhymes with “land,” a breeze that only circles back to the same place over and over: it is hard to read these as signaling anything other than vacuousness or futility. In redirecting the narrative drift of his poem, as we saw earlier, Tennyson also reforms narrative’s role in producing significance. Moving away from the \textit{kairos} that shapes stories around symbolic development, he approximates a literature of \textit{chronos}, weighting all moments evenly. But this temporality is equally distant from the mechanical clock time with which one might associate \textit{chronos}, with its connection to the monotony of nineteenth-century industrial labor. Clock time is imposed on human experience, but Lotos-land’s \textit{chronos} draws from somatic life as the ground against which meaning differentiates itself.\textsuperscript{27} And where mechanized time measures hours in terms of productive value, still expecting

\textsuperscript{26}Anne-Lise François’s theory of the “open secret,” a revelatory moment in the text which makes no demand on the reader’s attention, is helpful in thinking through what Tennyson is getting at in the above passage—although as I’ve noted, it seems Tennyson goes even farther in probing for feelings only available through inattention. François, \textit{Open Secrets}.

\textsuperscript{27}Isobel Armstrong famously reads “The Lotos-Eaters” as describing “the physical and mental world of \textit{sensations} which emerges from oppressed labour” (85). But while the near-uniform nature of the mariners’ sensations might resemble the time of mechanized labor, their grounding in the bodily rhythm of the heartbeat pulls against an understanding of this uniformity as the unhappy expression of a mechanically-depleted consciousness. Like Armstrong, I see the mariners as protesting an enforced estrangement which continually strips away “portions and parcels” of the self, but I understand the mechanism of enforcement to be a demand for self-transformation, while Armstrong describes the estrangement as a product of alienated labor. See Paul Fry on literature as sounding “the hum of existence.” Paul H. Fry, “The Hum of Literature: Ostension in Language,” \textit{Modern Language Quarterly} 51, no. 4 (1993): 171–82, 178.
something of significance from the ticking moment, the mariners simply waste their time. Their spending as gratuitous what Ulysses sees as the scarcest of commodities (“Life piled on life / Were all too little, and of one to me / Little remains …” [ll. 24–26]) is part of what makes “The Lotos-Eaters” so scandalous.

In weighing moments that make no difference in a life, Tennyson challenges the categories we use to produce significance. To write a history of the Lotos-eaters would be to tell a tale of lacunae, lulls, iterative spans about which another author might simply note, “Four months passed in this way.” Two years after Tennyson published Poems (1832), Carlyle sat down to write The French Revolution: A History and digressively imagined a “happy” people “whose annals are vacant.” The Lotos-eaters are that happy people, and as Carlyle’s description suggests, to write about them is to test the limits of historical record: “Consider it well, the Event, the thing which can be spoken of and recorded, is it not, in all cases, some disruption, some solution of continuity?” Writing about an island where “all things always seem the same,” Tennyson nears Carlyle’s paradox of an eventless history. What emerges in this history is not an account of the many “disruptions,” the many narratable events that stud any life, but rather the moments in which “nothing” happens, moments of relative continuity that swiftly pass into oblivion. The history produced here is one of minorness, of the minimal sensations and experiences that don’t fit in a narrative of life defined by changes of state, by Carlyle’s “Events” writ large. And as Samuel Johnson notes in the century before Carlyle, most of life comprises these empty moments, rather than the denser nodes of eventful significance:

It is said by modern philosophers, that not only the great globes of matter are thinly scattered through the universe, but the hardest bodies are so porous, that, if all matter were compressed to perfect solidity, it might be contained in a cube of a few feet. In like manner, if all the employment of life were crowded into the time which it really occupied, perhaps a few weeks, days, or hours, would be sufficient for its accomplishment, so far as the mind was engaged in the performance.29

---

29Samuel Johnson, The Rambler No. 8 (1750).
Literature, at least when Tennyson was writing, was usually in the business of representing “the employment of life” rather than life’s porous, uncrowded stretches. But in “The Lotos-Eaters” Tennyson sketches out a provisional history of the expanse of minor sensations that, despite their minorness, pervade most of our life. In this he looks for a way to supplement a history of lived experience in which only “significant” events and feelings are worth the telling.

Tennyson’s sensitivity to a proto-Carlylean concept of history, as a record of heroes and heroic action, is evident in his early poetry. Repeatedly he describes “the bright page” of fame (“Exhortation to the Greeks,” l. 7), on which great figures and places “blaze … like the morning star, whose gleam / Gazeth through the waste of night” (“The Fall of Jerusalem,” ll. 48, 51–52). But if Tennyson realizes that it is heroic, shining souls like Ulysses who make it into history’s annals, in the poems I’ve addressed he supplements fame’s glow by describing the “waste of night” that makes up most of “history’s darkened page” (l. 50). As with the minor sensations discussed above, this waste of night encompasses a swath of human experience larger than that occupied by the dense stars that blaze out against general oblivion. In “The Lotos-Eaters” Tennyson tries to account for this larger experience, rather than the story of a singular figure. As each mariner’s identity is subsumed into a corporate corporeality, the poem that begins with Ulysses’ ringing voice ends with the sound of collective impersonality. For a poet so invested in psychological difference—an investment that subtly feeds into Carlyle’s concept of history as an account of individual feats—Tennyson uses “The Lotos-Eaters” and the mer-poems to counter individual exceptionalism. Rather than taking the individual as the fundamental unit of society, these poems begin from a Burkean idea of the “little platoon,” and feed into a conservative history of communal continuity through time.

In her study of impersonality, Sharon Cameron writes that “the reduction to sensation without thoughts that appropriate it (or a seeing through such thoughts) unsocializes perception,” because it severs the connection between experiential phenomena and the more personal con-
ceptual organization of those phenomena. But as the Lotos-eaters show, impersonality does not equate to asociality. Tennyson imagines the shared experience of particular sensations, untranslated into thoughts, as providing the basis for communal intimacy without the hierarchical distinctions that surely framed social interaction on the ship. Readers of the poem have tended to focus on its solipsistic rather than its social aspects. They note the mariners’ retreat into their bodily interiors, where they listen to their own hearts beating and hear others speak only “as voices from the grave”—here “Perdidi Diem”’s tomb reappears (l. 34). But from the boneyard of the body the “choric song” emerges, with its origins in community rather than isolation. The inward turn here actually facilitates the social; one body’s repetitive sensations are similar enough to another’s to allow for something approaching shared experience. And we see what language Carlyle’s impossible annals might contain: as the mariners’ individual voices merge into a communal “we,” their language increasingly plays a somatic rather than signifying function. No longer shoring up the symbolic borders of a distinctive, developing personality, the mariners willingly blend one into another. Their song issues from neither a supervenient, expressive self nor an “official” civic discourse, but from the sort of sound games inherent in any linguistic system and associated primarily with pre-symbolic speech. Particularly in the 1832 ending, lines like “And the dark

31Alan Grob, for instance, argues that each mariner is the type of an artist who retreats into the “privacy of his own consciousness,” so that he can “devote himself to the mysteries of an art of which he is both creator and auditor.” David Riede similarly claims “that the lotos inspires poetic apprehension akin to Tennyson’s own and that such apprehension involves a melancholy withdrawal of the isolated self.” Alan Grob, “Tennyson’s the Lotos Eaters: Two Versions of Art,” *Modern Philology* 62, no. 2 (1964): 118–29, 122; Riede, *Allegories of One’s Own Mind*, 57.
32Maurice Blanchot’s discussion of the everyday has interesting parallels to this loss of self. Defining the everyday as “a level of life where what reigns is the refusal to be different,” Blanchot describes it as a state in which identity is held in solution: “The everyday is the movement by which the individual is held, as though without knowing it, in human anonymity.” Ann Rigney takes up ideas of the everyday particular to the nineteenth-century, in which writers struggle to articulate a history of the everyday even as they acknowledge the impossibility of successfully describing something which is, in Rigney’s words, “by definition too banal to be remembered in any detail.” Maurice Blanchot, “Everyday Speech,” trans. Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 12–20, 16–17; Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 75.
pine weeps, / And the lithe vine creeps” draw more from the play of lips, teeth, tongue, and breath than from sound’s representative function. This kind of babble, which could be drawn out indefinitely since it is separate from the teleological work of making meaning, is potentially accessible to anyone.

Tennyson further opens up the mode of interpersonal feeling that Wordsworth gestures towards when the latter identifies Michael’s “living Being” with his familiar surroundings and implicitly invites readers to join that “living Being” through immersing themselves in those surroundings. Where our imagined participation in Michael’s life is bound up with the untranslatable particularity of Grasmere’s landscape and the Cumbrian dialect, the community shaped by Tennyson’s poem is located nowhere more particular than the general human body, and identified with a language that almost needs no translation, in that it borders on universal unintelligibility. And on all other counts Tennyson seems to offer an easier version of a life devoted to the same. Both the mariners and Michael live without future prospects—the former because they have already been “half-forgotten” in history and because their sons have taken their place in the new Ithacan order, the latter because of the certain loss of his family land after Luke’s abandonment. But where Michael responds to his irrelevance by continuing on as if nothing had changed, and only in this disciplined duty finds the sustaining “pleasure which there is in life itself,” the mariners happily give up the call of duty to waste what life remains to them. In their welcome enjoyment of the same imaginative food, “[e]ating the Lotos day by day,” they make scarcity look like a luxury far removed from the hardscrabble subsistence of Michael’s final days. Yet this same abundance also measures the drift away from possibility as we move from Wordsworth to Tennyson: Wordsworth describes the life of “a class of men who are now almost confined to the north of England,” a class that is still extant but “rapidly disappearing”; by contrast Tennyson has to turn to pure fantasy to envision a life lived apart from the pressures of modernization.34

In Tennyson’s poetry we also get a sense, which is less obvious in “Michael,” of the cultural capital of an imagination dependent on new or exotic materials. Despite their provisionality, “The Lotos-Eaters” and the earlier mer-poems form Tennyson’s strongest critique of this dependence. Thus we can clarify Tennyson’s complicated relationship to nineteenth-century imaginative imperialism. For even as they draw on an exotic vocabulary, these poems use it to construct an ideal of pleasure that can exist where it is, an aesthetic subsistence in which “music” can arise from feelings as common as the breath or the heartbeat. These feelings may be imperceptible to a sensorium trained on what is novel or striking, but they somehow become accessible through inattention, through wasting time, even through failure. By giving up an orientation towards the unexperienced, even if only temporarily, Tennyson intimates that some compensatory pleasure can be felt in the emptiest of moments. And when the mariners refuse to pursue “something more,” they effectively resist the psychology motivating imperial and capitalist accumulation. Through their sit-in Tennyson imagines a conservative protest against the major cultural forces shaping British life in the mid-nineteenth century, cultural forces that others have read his poems as implicitly furthering. Thus the subversiveness of these poems has yet to be fully appreciated. The mer-poems and “The Lotos-Eaters” question the categories by which readers produce meaning, and even trouble the very project of assigning significance at all. Rather than seek narrative completion, a pursuit which measures time according to its transformative progress, they concede the emptiness of much experience: “let what is broken so remain” (l. 125). In accepting vacancy, waste, and incompletion, they supplement life’s rarer moments of dense historical significance.

After publishing Poems (1832), Tennyson seems to have given up his experiment to reform the imagination. It is worth noting that after “The Lotos-Eaters,” the next poem he writes addressing the tension between “something more” and stasis is “Ulysses,” composed in the immediate wake of Hallam’s death and reflecting, as we have seen, Tennyson’s “feeling about the need of going forward.” Galvanized towards action by the apparent waste of his friend’s promise, Tennyson also adopts a position much closer to Hallam’s own project of spiritual and imaginative realization. Ulysses in some ways can be read as a later version of the hero Hallam describes in “Timbuctoo,”
who is pictured “fevering with fond love of th’unknown shore” (l. 50). Following new knowledge, Hallam’s intellectual explorer gathers “novel truth[s]” as “living lamps that starred / His transit o’er the tremulous gloom of thought”:

More, and now more, their gathered brilliancy
On the one master Motion sending out,
Which brooded ever o’er the passionate sea
Of his deep soul. (ll. 56–62)

Even as Tennyson’s ambivalence over the project of travel lurks in its lines, “Ulysses” returns us to Hallam’s vision of intellectual discovery and of sounding the meaningful depths of the self. Ulysses’ imaginative projection forward into a “newer world” clears the way for Tennyson’s imperialist commitments in his later, more political poetry. But in tracing this trajectory in Tennyson’s career, critics have overlooked a set of early poems that experimentally uncoil the exotic “spring” of the imagination, replacing it with a “hook” to stay in one place.

**Coda: Tennyson and Aestheticism**

Musical, self-involved, showily divergent from referential ends: “The Lotos-Eaters” and the mer-poems have long been held to exemplify Tennyson’s early aestheticism. That so many parallels can be drawn between these poems and subsequent aestheticist art, suggests both Tennyson’s intuition of later artistic developments, and the vast resource his works would prove to those who contributed to the Aesthetic Movement. Tennyson’s circular imagery (the merfolks swimming from depths to surface and back again; the blowing Lotos dust) and exact rhyme (“land” and “land”; “whither away”) establish a self-referentiality like that which characterizes ideas of *l’art pour l’art*. Similarly, dense sonic textures attract attention to sound for its own sake, distracting from

---

35 Angela Leighton gives a recent, evocative account of Tennyson’s place in nineteenth-century aestheticism. As Leighton notes, the connections between Tennyson and aestheticism go far back: the first recorded instance of the word “aestheticism” was an 1855 reference to Tennyson’s “The Lotos-Eaters.” Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
signification. The mariners’ and merfolks’ happiness to waste time rather than to “shine in use”
anticipates the Aesthetic Movement’s anti-utilitarianism. Aesthicism’s association with queer
sexuality also seems applicable: the homosocial paradise of Lotos-land curtails the possibility of
reproduction, and the mariners give up their wives and children easily.

But despite these similarities, “The Lotos-Eaters” differs significantly from later aestheticist
principles. Figures central to how we conceive of aestheticism today—Gautier, Baudelaire, Pater,
Wilde— allied art to novelty. In their thinking the aesthete should be like a child who “sees
everything in a state of newness,” “forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new
impressions,” “always searching for new sensations.”36 Granted, these writers decoupled these
pursuits from the cultural ends furthered by Ulysses, and tapped novelty’s potential to fracture
rather than reinforce stereotyped narratives of development. But while the mariners similarly
resist progressive structures, they do so by going to the opposite extreme, choosing to forgo novelty
in favor of attenuated or repetitive feelings. In “The Lotos-Eaters” Tennyson is uninterested in
extraordinary sensations, which he places in the context of an exploratory, acquisitive attitude
towards the world. Rather, he imagines how pleasure might be found in sensations which are
so familiar as to be lost amidst what is more striking. These familiar feelings involve a different
kind of perceptual experience: where Pater famously encourages a heightened perception of each
moment, to “be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in
their purest energy,” by contrast the mariners’ pleasure comes with their relaxing attention (119).
Dreamily filtering any new impressions which invite symbolic mastery, the mariners’ willful lack
of focus allows them to feel the over-familiar hum of being alive. In their “hollow” experiences,
in feelings as light as rose petals falling on grass, Tennyson finds a fit subject on which to exercise
his lyrical talent. It is the insignificance of the mariners’ time on the island that allows the verbal

unspooling of the poem’s 1832 ending, in which language loosens from symbolic pattern into the rawer material of sonic resemblance. As Tennyson describes music echoing from “hollow” sea and “hollow” cave, he implies that empty experiences uniquely license the sonic power that is his aesthetic hallmark.

Tennyson’s altered 1842 ending to “The Lotos-Eaters” moves towards rejecting this approach to language. As he paints the Epicurean gods treating “a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong” as “a music” and “a tale of little meaning” (ll. 162–164), he reminds readers that language has both a history and a symbolic function, and intimates that focusing primarily on its somatic aspect is to cruelly ignore human concerns. Yet, as we have seen, the earlier drift of the poem was not to evacuate history altogether but rather to produce something like a—minor—counterhistory, attending to blank moments of lived experience that occur (if they can be said to “occur” at all) in the intervals between more striking events. And although a somatic musicality winds throughout Tennyson’s verse even up through his mature poetry, he never again imagines an aestheticist vision as thoroughgoing as the one asserted in the 1832 “The Lotos-Eaters.” The course of nineteenth-century aestheticism might have been very different had he been more persistent.
Chapter 3

“Doomed to Live”: The Fate of Eliot’s Aesthetic Humanism

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

William Blake

the dead can mother nothing ... nothing
but our sight: they mother that, whether they will or no

Brigit Pegeen Kelly

What if art works were alive? What if they could look on us, speak to us, become our companions? In this chapter I take up George Eliot’s interest in this question, arguing that she describes a role for aesthetic objects as our familiars: things that are both known and personal, and that strangely border between ghostly associates and actual humans. This role is central to what I will call Eliot’s *aesthetic humanism*, in which the value of art derives from its establishing material continuity between humans through time. For Eliot, artificially wrought objects draw us into contact with persons from the past—as when Maggie, reading a book in *The Mill on the Floss*, reaches out to feel the “hand” of its marginal writer, and listens to a “low voice” guiding her
through the text. But this same contact, when perpetuated indefinitely, can become a nightmare: thus in *The Lifted Veil*, written at the same time as *The Mill*, the physical forms of past citizens loom over present-day Prague in the statues that line the Charles Bridge, menacing its current occupants. I read through these two texts to a later, lesser-known poem of Eliot’s published in 1870, *The Legend of Jubal*, in which Eliot brings art’s power to effect continuity to a crisis.

**Familiar Sensations in *The Mill on the Floss***

Like Wordsworth and Tennyson, Eliot was interested in exploring an aesthetics of familiar, slight sensations. Unlike them, she had the benefit of living with an expert on the subject. And more than any other nineteenth-century writer, George Henry Lewes’s physiological psychology was concerned with sensations that are “unperceived”:

> Nothing is more certain than that we have many sensations, which are not perceived at all, of which we are said to be wholly “unconscious.” They are either so faint in themselves, or so familiar, they are either so submerged in stronger sensations, or so incapable of exciting … the preoccupied mind, that we are neither “conscious” of them when present, nor capable of remembering them afterwards.¹

Although most of the sensations rushing over and within our bodies at any given moment are not noticed for themselves, Lewes argues that nevertheless they collectively support our consciousness. He describes them as “the daylight of our existence,” rarely attended to for itself but essential to illuminating “those particular sensations of pleasure or pain … which usurp a prominence among the objects of the sensitive panorama” (62). And as he illustrates how a sensation could be unperceived he turns to an example that has excited generations of Eliot scholars: “The mill-wheel, at first so obtrusive in its sound, ceases at length to excite any attention. The impressions on our auditory nerves continue; but although we hear them, we cease to think about them” (57). Lewes goes on to lay out a theory of “reflex action” which explains how these unperceived sensations

prompt automatic responses, causing us to act without being aware of what we’re doing or why we’re doing it.

This theory, and the suggestive example of the mill-wheel (produced at just the point when Eliot was writing *The Mill on the Floss*), have led critics to explore how Lewes’s account of unperceived sensations might complicate issues of subjectivity and responsibility in Eliot’s fiction at large and in *The Mill* in particular. These issues are central to Eliot’s works, and critics following Sally Shuttleworth have instrumentally shown how Lewes’s (and others’) physiological psychology contributes to her complex treatment of character and of moral action. But these critics have overlooked how Lewes’s claim that sensations could go “unperceived” (and that this could be an effect of their familiarity, as he notes) is just as challenging to Eliot’s theory of aesthetic perception.² And when we encounter the titular object in *The Mill*, it is neither as a symbol for a divided subject nor as a figure for unreflective action, but as an aesthetic form.

We first “hear” the mill in the novel’s opening chapter, in a carefully-rendered scene that would not seem out of place in Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*. Far off we see “black ships” “laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal,” and nearer by “the full stream, the vivid grass, the delicate bright-green powder softening the outline of the great trunks and branches that gleam from under the bare purple boughs.” As we move closer to Dorlcote Mill, however, the narrator modulates this sensory fineness: “The rush

²Shuttleworth reads *The Mill* as exploring how unconscious processes may disrupt “the theory of a unified subject.” More recently, Vanessa Ryan has written about how Eliot’s awareness of processes of “unconscious cerebration” challenged her sense of the extent people could be responsible for their actions. And although many critics have explored Eliot’s concern to shape aesthetic experience around familiar objects, they haven’t considered how this concern was affected by contemporary theories of familiarity’s effect on sensation. Alison Booth argues that Eliot’s interest in obscure or commonplace things “betrays a feminist bias toward the underprivileged detail.” Neil Hertz notes “the stress [Eliot] places on the reader’s (or the character’s) reluctance to attend” to “unnoticed aspects of life.” Summer J. Star’s phenomenological reading is an exception in considering how aesthetic experience might involve feelings beneath the level of conscious thought: she argues that our embodied perception of the world, which is not felt in and of itself, is nevertheless essential to Eliot’s art. Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 66; Ryan, *Thinking Without Thinking in the Victorian Novel*; Alison Booth, *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 86; Neil Hertz, *George Eliot’s Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 29; Summer J. Star, “Feeling Real in Middlemarch,” *ELH* 80, no. 3 (2013): 839–69.
of the water and the booming of the mill bring a dreamy deafness, which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. They are like a great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond.” Precisely delineated images blur into an indefinite, “dreamy” form as “shapeless” as the heap of stones in “Michael,” and the narrator’s perceptual focus, which was clear up to this point, now seems hard to locate: can she hear the booming that causes her “deafness,” or is she deaf to it as well? The “curtain of sound,” which we might expect to be drawn aside for the main action to begin, becomes here the main action itself, just as the “dreamy deafness” not only frames the scene’s “peacefulness” but also seems to constitute its peace. Here we see in miniature the way a familiar and repeated sensation (“the unresting wheel,” or later “mill-like monotony”) may form an aesthetic pleasure even as it beats in the background of consciousness. We enter, briefly, the border territory Wordsworth had described between sensibility and insensibility, and recognize in the narrator’s inattentive pleasure the spaced-out bliss of Tennyson’s mariners.

What Eliot adds to Tennyson (and in a more complicated manner to Wordsworth) is her intensely personal characterization of familiar sensations. A few sentences earlier, touching on the Floss, she writes: “It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank, and listen to its low, placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving” (9). In a novel about a girl profoundly lonely and misunderstood by most of her fellow characters, familiar sensations repeatedly evoke a personal intimacy elsewhere lacking: they speak in a “mother-tongue,” with a “voice,” a “face,” an “embrace,” a “personality,” as a “living companion.” And yet for all their familiarity—or rather, because of it—these sensations are described throughout The Mill as affecting those who love them only indistinctly and dreamily, as feelings submerged in general perception. The “low, placid voice” of the Floss draws easily from the river that opens Wordsworth’s 1799 Prelude, the Derwent that made “ceaseless music through the night and day” of Wordsworth’s

---

childhood and “sent a voice / That flowed along [his] dreams.” To convey this texture of “ceaseless music,” blended imperceptibly with other thoughts and feelings, is Eliot’s task in *The Mill*—particularly in her narratorial asides; it was also Tennyson’s in “The Lotos-Eaters” and Wordsworth’s in the early, childhood-focused *Prelude* and in “Michael.” The latter poem appeals to regular sensations to dismantle the notion of a private self: the fields and hills shape a “living Being” that is just as much Michael’s ancestors’ as his own; and Tennyson’s lotos-eaters similarly chant to lose their individual selves within a corporate body. But for Eliot familiar sensations have a personality as singular as her narrator’s voice. Although by the end of the novel we may have grown used to this voice—it may not strike us with its sureness, its tenderness, as clearly as it does in the first few pages—it is for all our inattention no less distinctive in itself.

As she does in the first chapter, throughout *The Mill* Eliot repeatedly gestures to an aesthetic intimacy that engages with familiar sensations as “living companions.” And yet the extent to which these sensations are distinctly perceived as sensations remains in doubt. As we have seen in my earlier discussions of Wordsworth and Tennyson, nineteenth-century writers often described the imagination as most attracted by what is new, rare, or exotic, as something designed to “launch” or “spring” outwards rather than to remain among familiar surroundings. This characterization continues through Eliot’s career, and Eliot herself refers to it in *The Mill* when she acknowledges “our instructed vagrancy” which “stretches the theatre of its imagination to the Zambesi” (277). In contrast to this, Eliot emphasizes a delight in “linger[ing] by the hedgerows.” Like Tennyson with his “hooked” and “clinging” night-bats, she proposes an aesthetic pleasure found in attachment rather than dislocation:

> The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet, what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky, with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort

---

of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows,—such things as these are the mother-tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle, inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. (45–6)

The imagination’s “mother-tongue” comprises the objects we encounter in early life, the “primary sensations” which, as Eliot’s contemporary Alexander Bain writes, produce “the utmost pitch of attainable delight” when they “first thrill … the virgin fibres of the brain.”5 For Eliot these “familiar,” “well-remembered” objects are important not just because they gave that first and sharpest thrill of pleasure, but more because of the “subtle, inextricable associations” that have accumulated around them over time. Here we see Wordsworth’s early influence on her in its fullness, even as her vision of nature’s maternal presence wears none of the austere power that his earth sometimes assumes. Yet these Wordsworthian associations, even as they hallow particular objects for Eliot, make it all the more difficult to vividly perceive these objects. Association works as a kind of short-hand, conveying many ideas very quickly: to look at a familiar flower is to think of it growing next to your childhood house, is to think of picking it with your brother when little, is to think of taking fishing trips with him, is to think of being estranged from him. Association, that is, doesn’t cause us to dwell on a particular object but to slide away from that object towards all that it is connected with, bearing us away in thought before we even notice we’ve left. This train of memories makes the blue-eyed speedwell and the grassy fields significant to The Mill’s narrator, but it also takes away from the powerful perceptual experience of them that she’s trying to evoke.

This is a problem which Eliot takes on, describing a role for “love” in creating pleasure in familiar perceptions despite their sensible decay. Her larger picture of mind in The Mill seems to accord with Bain’s account of sensations becoming “feeblener by continuance and repetition.”6 Later

---

5 Alexander Bain, The Emotions and the Will (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1865), 44. Eliot was familiar with Bain’s writing both through her partner George Henry Lewes and through her own reading.
6 Alexander Bain, The Emotions and the Will (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1859), 208. Bain’s account of sensation fading through repetition is typical of the nineteenth century. An 1849 introductory textbook to the study of mind, for example, notes that the “grand law of the pleasures and pains of sense is that by frequent repetitions they lose their vividness,” echoing a discussion of sensation in an early edition of The Cyclopædia. This “law” has a long provenance stretching back into the eighteenth century, and was standard in accounts of sensation by the time Eliot was writing. Daniel Bishop, An Introduction to the Study of the Mind (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1857), 13.
in the novel she intimates a similar falling-off from “when joys were vivid,” and her above image of
the “thrill,” rather than indicating an intense sensory experience, simply points out the particular
location in the brain that familiar sensations stimulate: “deep and delicate” because the earlier we
experience something the “deeper” it lodges its trace. (If we saw hedgerows as children, seeing them
in later life will affect the same deep part of the brain that they first touched, in Bain’s and Lewes’s
model of the nervous system.) Eliot implies that love provides a recompense for this perceptual
feebleness, but her language leaves it uncertain exactly how it does so: “Our delight in the sunshine
on the deep-bladed grass to-day might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if
it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years which still live in us, and transform
our perception into love” (46). Eliot’s formulation is curious; walking today among the grass, it is
not the grass itself we see, as we might expect (or if we do see it, we see it “faintly”), but rather our
memory of the grass as it was in the past, which is still vivid in our mind even if the reality is not.
And this memory transforms our present perception into “love.” But the effect is left ambiguous,
since Eliot’s characterization (“our delight … might be no more than the faint perception”) doesn’t
specify whether we still have only a “faint perception” but with the superadded delight of “love,”
or whether that “faint perception” is itself intensified through love. Perception’s uncertain status is
only made more evident when we compare this image of the sunshine with Lewes’s similar figure
for unperceived sensations as “the daylight of our existence,” not seen for itself but making other
objects visible.

If for Eliot the pleasures of memory sufficed for aesthetic experience, there would be little
reason to seek out “the deep-bladed grass to-day”; the mental image of the “grass in the far-off
years” can be enjoyed apart from present-day reality, just as in the opening chapter the narrator
dreamily remembers Dorlcote Mill even though she is herself actually elsewhere. But Eliot calls
upon memory not as an end in itself, but as a means to sustaining contact with the sunshine and
the grass today in its sensible, non-ideal form. Through our love for objects as we remember them
we reach out to restore their present-day, “fainter” impressions. Ruskin had glancingly posited
a similar process in Modern Painters, writing that “perception is … quickened by love” and that
love “hallows the physical perception of external objects.” This idea runs to the heart of Eliot’s aesthetics, in which she describes the value of aesthetic perception as deriving from love:

We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it,—if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass; the same hips and haws on the autumn’s hedgerows; the same redbreasts that we used to call “God’s birds,” because they did no harm to the precious crops. What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known, and loved because it is known? (45)

In this final, fervent sentence we hear the keynote of Eliot’s concept of aesthetic value, in which intimate knowledge and love make up the bulk of perceptions’ “worth.” For Eliot love rivets us to “the same” objects in all their familiarity, without resorting to estrangement to re-endear us to the world. We can see this difference in relief by comparing an 1870 article in The Cornhill Magazine which praises novelists’ ability to momentarily break up “monotonous” familiarity: “Under their enchantment we can for a few moments see the world, as though we had just dropped from another planet, and everything had the charm of complete newness.” Both Eliot and the anonymous writer for the The Cornhill Magazine describe novels’ subject as the real world; but for the latter, novels restore value to our perception of that world by defamiliarizing it, while for the former this tactic is morally suspect, since it dissolves the very intimacy that hallows our relationship to familiar things. Closer to home, we can contrast Eliot’s praise of “sweet monotony” with Ruskin’s excoriation of “all repetition” in art as “blameable,” showing a failure to respond sensitively to nature’s infinite variation. But for Eliot the point is that a system of value that privileges variety and novelty is weighted against intimate knowledge. “Nature” may be infinite, but particular

---

objects in nature—the autumn “hips and haws”—will return each time with less distinctive effect, driving the novelty-hungry mind to look elsewhere for pleasure.

Eliot makes perception a moral affair: for her, love looks out not for what is different about a given object but for what is “the same,” and preserves that sameness from sensible destruction. It is oriented not towards objects’ potential for future change, but towards protecting the knowledge they have already given us. Thus the The Mill’s narrator’s account of “taste” in Book II, although it admits a principle of improving judgment, is biased towards early objects of pleasure:

Very commonplace, even ugly, that furniture of our early home might look if it were put up to auction; an improved taste in upholstery scorns it; and is not the striving after something better and better in our surroundings the grand characteristic that distinguishes man from the brute, or, to satisfy a scrupulous accuracy of definition, that distinguishes the British man from the foreign brute? But heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining round those old inferior things; if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory. One’s delight in an elderberry bush overhanging the confused leafage of a hedgerow bank, as a more gladdening sight than the finest cistus or fuchsia spreading itself on the softest undulating turf, is an entirely unjustifiable preference to a nursery-gardener, or to any of those regulated minds who are free from the weakness of any attachment that does not rest on a demonstrable superiority of qualities. And there is no better reason for preferring this elderberry bush than that it stirs an early memory; that it is no novelty in my life, speaking to me merely through my present sensibilities to form and color, but the long companion of my existence, that wove itself into my joys when joys were vivid. (160)

Eliot’s is the pack-rat’s philosophy of taste, in which nothing is thrown away; we may learn to appreciate “the finest cistus” but we will never leave behind the “elderberry bush.” And the “striving” by which we refine taste is more than counterbalanced by a “twining round those old inferior things” which cares for intimacy more than for progress. Her phrase, “the weakness of any attachment,” cunningly hides a double meaning. Attachment to early objects of affection may indicate a “weakness” on the part of the perceiver (although Eliot’s tone is ironic here), but her language also hints at the fragility of the perceptual connection that roots us to the sensible forms of our past. As particular perceptions’ vividness wears away, and our sensibilities require different
things for stimulation, it takes a sustained effort to remain in perceptual contact with the things that stir early memories—and yet this is where highest aesthetic delight lies.

The narrator’s tongue-in-cheek recognition of “the striving after something better and better” as civilization’s motor, separating “man” from “brute,” curiously aligns her own preference for the “commonplace” with a brutish sensibility to lower things. Her aesthetic theory bends away from intellection and toward sensuousness: material objects of pleasure are important in themselves rather than in how they reflect on abstract ideals of color and form. The passage ultimately inverts the ideal of civilized progress with which it begins, as Eliot redefines culture (images of which play throughout this passage’s description of gardening) around caring for “old inferior things.” Writing at a time in which the reality of matter’s “rapine, degradation, and loss” was increasingly salient, primarily due to Darwin’s theories (as Gillian Beer has shown), The Mill frames the project of material preservation with new urgency. Culture’s highest ends are what might have appeared its lower ends: not ideal pursuit of “superiority” (which we might compare to Matthew Arnold’s later concept of our “best self”), but a careful retention of sensuous particularity. This is where moral life resides.

Eliot’s moralization of the process of perceptual decay, in which love manifests as attention to “faint perceptions,” and her insistent referral to familiar perceptions in personal terms, as “long companions,” “living companions,” “personalities,” and so on, asks us to treat familiar aesthetic objects as if they were, well, familiars, things that weirdly border between real people and

---

10 The extent of Eliot’s materialism has been the subject of critical debate. George Levine describes both Eliot and Lewes as materialists, although he notes that they “they would have rejected the … label.” Levine, The Realistic Imagination, 263. See Ian Duncan for an account of how Eliot’s fictional use of scientific language moves between “thoughts and things.” Ian Duncan, “George Eliot’s Science Fiction,” Representations 125, no. 1 (2014): 15–39.

11 Gillian Beer, Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xix. Beer contrasts Darwin’s understanding of historical process as “usurpation” with Lamarck’s idea of succession as a principle of continuity. Other critics have discussed Eliot’s attempt to reconcile contemporary scientific theories of disruption (whether psychological, biological, or geological) with her hopes for organic social development. See especially George Levine and Sally Shuttleworth. Catherine Gallagher, coming at Eliot’s interest in “the obscure, the imperfect, and the commonplace” from a different angle, describes it as a matter of representation, in which all details are equally important. George Levine, Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Catherine Gallagher, The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 222.
ghostly associates. Describing past objects as things that “still live in us” (to refer to the passage on sunshine and grass above), Eliot intimates that allowing a “grove of tropic palms” to obscure one of these objects in our regard is to let a living being die. Love keeps “old, inferior things” “living” in all the resonance of that term, as things vivid, active, current, not forgotten. Through their association with persons—with our earlier selves and with those who were part of our early life—familiar objects take on some of the attributes of personhood and partake of personhood’s essential inviolability. And it is not only through long association that they take on the status of “living companions.” There is a further connection between faint perceptions and the world of human beings, which Eliot lays out in *Romola*:

> The feelings that gather fervour from novelty will be of little help towards making the world a home for dimmed and faded human beings; and if there is any love of which they are not widowed, it must be the love that is rooted in memories and distills perpetually the sweet balms of fidelity and forbearing tenderness.\(^{12}\)

Eliot erases any clear demarcation between our feeling for old things and our feeling for old people. She envisions a culture of feeling in which, by finding delight in what is wearing out, we maintain the world as a welcome place for “dimmed and faded human beings.” An aesthetic grounded in love strengthens the social response incumbent upon us: to love “faint perceptions” is to become the sort of person who loves the weaker members of human society. Thus although our response to “dimmed” sensations is not morally equivalent to our treatment of “dimmed” human beings, we should behave as if they were equivalent, because the one is so essential to the other. Only by understanding this can we come to comprehend the sociability of familiar objects in *The Mill*—a sociability which the novel leads us to expect from the very first paragraph, in which the Floss “hurries” while the meeting tide “loves,” “rushes,” “checks,” “impetuously embraces,” and the “lively” tributary Ripple speaks with “low, placid voice” “like a living companion” (9). The vision of the world here is one in which familiar things constantly chatter, murmur, and whisper around us: in developing sensitivity to their quiet impressions we learn to listen and care for all kinds of

quietness. If we are callous to the “low, placid voice” of the familiar river near our birthplace, we will never hear and love Mr. Tulliver’s “low voice” after his “humiliation” (275, 274).

Thus the posture of the aesthetic observer, as Eliot indicates it in *The Mill’s* narratorial asides, should be one of leaning close to hear familiar sensations on the edge of perceptibility, and of loving them as if they were “living companions.” This attitude is contrasted with a “striving” bent toward the future, which we might variously associate with the eager novel reader, hurrying forward to discover the plot, or with the naked consumerism intent on “an improved taste in upholstery.” Striving, unmitigated by tenderness, carries us away from the things we know and leaves a trail of neglected objects behind it. Eliot imagines the Bardos and the Mr. Tullivers of the world as inextricable from these objects, bound up in their dotage with the faded things of the past. But lingering, twining, and leaning low looks at what others might disregard, caring for the “old, inferior” parts of the world and by extension for those who live among them: love preserves things against their sensible decline, and for Eliot love is inseparable from aesthetic life. That the two instances of “dimmed and faded human beings” that we have noted in Eliot’s art—Bardo and Mr. Tulliver—are both fathers, is not incidental. We cannot choose our parents, and for Eliot aesthetic life also is hardly about choice; rather it serves as a field in which we feel pleasure in what is already around us. We can contrast this picture with Philip Fisher’s reading of *The Mill* as recording that

… it is the disappearance of the world we know, the familiar world, that precipitates us into a world we choose and create. This later world is ruled by esthetics, the preference for one thing over another by the sensations it gives us.13

This is precisely the mentality that Eliot writes the novel against. Fisher assumes that “esthetics” necessitates choice, and thus he replicates the consumerist perspective that Eliot’s narrator ironizes above. *The Mill* undoes this assumption. Its understanding of aesthetic life is deeply conservative, and looks much more like Edmund Burke’s “consent” to the given than like Fisher’s liberal freedom

---

from the given. Yet where Burke writes “consent” and struggles to make that consent a delight, Eliot takes the delight too as a given; for her the “presumed pleasure of every rational creature is in unison with the predisposed order of things.”

This pleasure is essential to what I call Eliot’s aesthetic humanism. Ulrich Knoepflmacher has written on her “religious humanism,” noting the influence of Feuerbach’s anthropocentric religion and of Comtean idealism (in both of which “love” was the byword) on Eliot’s thinking. Both Feuerbach and Comte understood cultural rituals to reflect human, as opposed to divine, significance: for Feuerbach this was expressed in Christianity, while Comte founded his own Religion of Humanity. Knoepflmacher describes Eliot’s indebtedness to these thinkers as manifested in a particular temporal orientation, a “dual method of looking backward and forward in time,” which sees the present and the future as continuous with the past and thus as necessarily subject to the past. For Comte, Knoepflmacher notes, this subjection entails treating “past figures” as if they were “alive”—Comte himself eerily evokes the past’s agency in describing the brain as “the apparatus through which the dead govern the living.” Comte is interested in ideas over material objects, and Knoepflmacher similarly reads Eliot’s humanism as attending to the human “spirit” against the “materialist tenets” of “evolutionism” (16). But as we have seen, Eliot reveres the past in its materiality and resists translating that materiality into ideas, however more easily the latter may be carried forward in time.

---

14See Bernard Semmel’s discussion of Eliot’s conservatism, in which he compares her thinking with Burke’s and nuances other critical discussions of her liberal philosophy. Bernard Semmel, George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).


17The extent of Eliot’s materialism has been the subject of critical debate. George Levine describes both Eliot and Lewes as materialists, although he notes that they “they would have rejected the … label.” Levine, The Realistic Imagination, 263. See Ian Duncan for an account of how Eliot’s fictional use of scientific language moves between “thoughts and things.” Duncan, “George Eliot’s Science Fiction..
Yet how can we carry the material of the past into the future, since matter is notoriously prone to decay? Eliot’s answer, I argue, is art. Hence her aesthetic humanism: art, unlike social philosophy, is necessarily bound to sensuous material. Art, for Eliot, creates a material copy of past things and so perpetuates those things, against their sensible decline, into the future. It replicates the work of love that we have seen in The Mill: it makes past sensations live on as familiar companions, borrowing personality from the people once associated with them and requiring the same kind of lingering attention that we would give to “dimmed and faded human beings.” Art enables the material continuity of humanity’s past with its present, just as Comte’s religion enables humanity’s ideal continuity from age to age.

The Mill points to artificially wrought “aesthetic” objects, as separate from the natural sunshine, grass, or elderberry bush, as extending the personality of the past well beyond the limits of a single life. The narrator may enjoy the “personality” of the “hedgerows” near her home, a personality partly transferred to the hedgerows by their contact with her own past self: but what if she could perpetuate that personality into a remote future, for other people to enjoy in turn? We see an encounter like this happen when Maggie reads the Imitation of Christ, by Thomas à Kempis. As she reads Maggie reaches back in time to touch earlier persons associated with her book, in which “some hand, now forever quiet, had made at certain passages strong pen-and-ink marks, long since browned by time” (301) The “browned” ink indicates a sensible fading over time that recalls the faint, dim, faded sensations we’ve seen thus far, and Maggie in tracing these marks touches not just ink and paper but through these things a quiet “hand” from the past. This touching gradually becomes listening as she reads on “from one brown mark to another, where the quiet hand seemed to point, hardly conscious that she was reading, seeming rather to listen [to] a low voice” (302). This “low voice,” like the “low, placid voice” of the Floss and the “low voice” of Mr. Tulliver, asks its listener to lean close to hear what is being said; but here the listening is no longer directed towards a voice from our own past (the Floss) or a voice of a dimmed and faded human in the present (Mr. Tulliver), but the voice of someone long gone and “now forever quiet.” In this word “quiet,” which indicates both a hushed noise and the total absence of noise, Eliot
imagines a kind of listening that can somehow hear the dead.

It is not the ideas in *Imitation of Christ* that matter most in Maggie’s reading: although they influence her actions, the novel ultimately frames them as inadequate to her situation. What is most powerful about the book is not its transfer of thoughts through time—which is what religious humanists might celebrate most—but rather how it facilitates contact between two embodied humans across time. Maggie pushes through the text to the person who loved it and lived with it, and back even farther to the person who wrote it, to “the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and suffered and renounced,—in the cloister, perhaps, with serge gown and tonsured head” (303). These personal encounters can be clarified in relation to Susan Stewart’s theory of aesthetic experience as intersubjective, in which she argues that poems, by figuring “the senses of touching, seeing, and hearing that are central to the encounter with the presence of others,” transform reading or listening into a “face-to-face” meeting with another person.18 As in Stewart’s account, Maggie’s reading of *Imitation of Christ* (which, we notice, engages the same senses which Stewart privileges, although in a slightly different manner) comes back to what Stewart calls “an *eidos* of the human figure”: the marks on the page bring her not just to the ideas they represent but more importantly to the hands, voices, bodies of those associated with them (197). And this is where the text’s primary value lies—in bringing Maggie to the sensuous reality of another human being. But Eliot, in a different way than Stewart, is aware of this as a deeply fraught encounter. Her emphasis is on how this sensuous material seems to fade over time—the once “strong” ink now “browned,” the “quiet” hand, the “low voice.” This fading indicates not only the usual failing of objects as we become used to them—here imagined on a massive historical scale, as things become absorbed into cultural associations and are no longer strikingly noticed for themselves—but also the gradually-lessening effect of past persons on the present as it becomes removed from their lives. Eliot imagines the “low voice” as something that persists, but only in quieter and quieter form: it is “far-echoing” with “long lingering vibrations,” but both echoes and vibrations, even though they

---

may “linger” indefinitely, eventually drop below the level where we can hear and feel them (304). Yet in Maggie’s huddled attention to this quietness Eliot imagines her bending towards what is on the brink of imperceptibility, by her careful sensitivity making the remote past speak again, live again.

That Eliot hopes her readers will have a similar experience in reading The Mill is implied not only by this central example of reading within the novel but by the novel’s larger nested structure. Maggie, in reading, reaches back both to the personality of one who loved the book, found in the “quiet hand” in the margins, and then through that hand to another person, presumably the author, in hearing the “voice of a brother”; so too, The Mill invites the reader into a similar chain of contact with the personalized narrator and through her with Maggie earlier in time. The narrator’s impassioned appeals to the reader (many of them touched on above) enact a process of drawing her in nearer and nearer. We can see this for instance in the earlier “striving” passage, where “our affections” becomes “one’s delight” becomes “my joys,” moving us by degrees towards a near-identification with the narrator’s pleasures. This resembles Wordsworth’s invitation to the reader to become “my second self,” except there the identification works by a stripping-down of the private self. Here the narrator retains her distinctive personality, as does Maggie, and we are led to feel for another’s joys that are definitely apart from our own. The layering effect, whereby we move to the narrator and through her to Maggie, is apparent from that first scene by the Floss, when the narrator seems to stand next to Maggie as almost embodied, “watching” the mill from the bridge even as “that little girl,” Maggie, “is watching it too” just nearby. We, of course, are also “watching” it as we imagine this, and are invited by analogy to join the scene. The work of the novel as it artificially renders these images, then, is to materially extend them through time to the sensitively receptive reader; and the reader by loving them also extends them a little farther, just as the marginal reader of Imitation of Christ kept the text alive for it to reach Maggie. The process of moral perception Eliot describes, in letting “the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years … still live in us,” is meant to apply to our perception not only of our own past but of others’ pasts as well, as we encounter them in art. We are made to bear earlier figures onward into the future by our
receptivity—we continue the echoes of the past, make their vibrations linger longer.

The Mill gestures towards writerly artifice as perpetuating past humans’ experiences forward in time. In its backward-looking orientation, being set (like most of Eliot’s fiction) about forty years before its publication, the novel is placed in a lagging or lingering relation to the present. We can compare this to how Burke locates himself in the past (“I am in this year, 1796, only where all the powers of Europe were in 1793”), only here this locating stretches farther back in time, maintaining the experiences of a previous generation. But how far can this extension reach? Maggie faintly hears the echoes of a voice from four centuries ago; is this the outer limit? A figure that Eliot develops in a poem five years later for this continuity of the past into the present suggests there may be no limit at all. Eliot describes the life filled with “love”:

Full souls are double mirrors, making still
An endless vista of fair things before
Repeating things behind …

This image of loving accretion recalls the “striving” passage above, where we retain delight in the elderberry bush even as we grow to enjoy the cistus as well. But this hope of never losing early aesthetic objects turns against her here with the double mirror’s mise en abyme, a figure far more terrifying than tender. Love’s characteristics—its embrace of sensory monotony, its hope to carry past objects of affection undamaged into the future—force a vertiginous reduplication of “fair things.” Nothing is lost; each loved thing is reflected as precisely at each subsequent point of time as it was at the first. But this fantasy of love perpetuating objects against their sensory demise is sublimely disquieting. This is not least because of its “making still,” a phrase that ambiguously implicates the double mirror in a murder of the very things it seeks to preserve. And this mirroring—a figure that Eliot famously uses for her own novelistic art in Adam Bede—brings us

---

20This is not the only place in Eliot’s writing where mirrors cause problems. George Levine argues that Eliot’s hesitancy towards the mirror as a metaphor for literary realism leads to her “preoccupation with perspective” in Middlemarch (The Realistic Imagination, 261). Jim Reilly argues that in Victorian texts, mirrors “dislocate” and “distort” reality more than they aptly copy it. Jim Reilly, Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad, and George Eliot (London: Routledge, 1993), 81.
to the brink of narrative impossibility. *The Mill* had skirted this brink, for example in the “sweet monotony” passage above, where the narrator imagines a life filled with “the same,” “the same,” “the same,” or in Maggie’s repeated returns to her home after false starts towards new futures, but here the strain of repetitively bearing the past forward seems to entail formal suicide: no one can write a story that looks like a double mirror. In the dizzying scale of this image we veer away from *The Mill*’s “sweet monotony” and towards the visionary doom reported in *The Lifted Veil*.

**Artificial Life in *The Lifted Veil***

Much critical ink has been spilled on the temporary resuscitation, through a medically dubious post-mortem blood transfusion, of a character in *The Lifted Veil*.\(^{21}\) This might seem to be the short story’s salient example of what we could call “artificial life”—here indicating life that is prolonged beyond its “natural” term, propped up by art. But let me suggest another. Latimer, *The Lifted Veil*’s awkward, sickly narrator, is struck early on in the story with the power of “provision”: he can foresee future events, and read the thoughts of the people around him. His first vision is of Prague, a city he has never visited. But this is not just a provision, although it accurately predicts what Latimer sees when he travels to Prague later on. Rather Latimer looks with a double gaze, seeing both forward in time and also backward into Prague’s deep past. What he sees is a city inhabited by its dead, who alongside the living go about their everyday affairs, “doomed to live on in the stale repetition of memories.”\(^{22}\) This “doom,” I will argue, reflects Eliot’s ambivalence over the power of art to vivify past experiences. At the core of her early hope for art there is also despair—not that art might fail to keep the past alive, but that it might succeed all too well.

---

\(^{21}\) In the story Charles Meunier, a medical friend of the narrator Latimer, resuscitates Mrs. Archer, the maid to Latimer’s wife Bertha. Mrs. Archer then reveals Bertha’s plot to kill her husband before expiring again. Critics interested in the story’s relationship to contemporary physiology have paid particular attention to this moment. Kate Flint reads the blood transfusion not as “melodramatic invention” but as an intervention “questioning the desirability of specular- ity” within medical science (472–3). Kate Flint, “Blood, Bodies, and the Lifted Veil,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, no. 4 (March 1997): 455–73.

While the narrator in *The Mill* celebrates how “the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years … still live in us,” and suggests that this living on can be perpetuated through the novelist’s art, Latimer’s sense of the past’s survival in present-day Prague is far more sinister. *The Lifted Veil* is often read as a weird lapse of Eliot’s into gothic sensationalism; but this reading miscalculates the short story, which seems rather to stretch her aesthetic ideals to their extreme.23 Her humanist vision of art is fully realized in the scene that Latimer describes, but it is realized as nightmare:

My father was called away before he had finished his sentence, and he left my mind resting on the word *Prague*, with a strange sense that a new and wondrous scene was breaking upon me: a city under the broad sunshine, that seemed to me as if it were the summer sunshine of a long-past century arrested in its course—unrefreshed for ages by dews of night, or the rushing rain-cloud; scorching the dusty, weary, time-eaten grandeur of a people doomed to live on in the stale repetition of memories, like deposed and superannuated kings in their regal gold-inwoven tatters. The city looked so thirsty that the broad river seemed to me a sheet of metal; and the blackened statues, as I passed under their blank gaze, along the unending bridge, with their ancient garments and their saintly crowns, seemed to me the real inhabitants and owners of this place, while the busy, trivial men and women, hurrying to and fro, were a swarm of ephemeral visitants infesting it for a day. It is such grim, stony beings as these, I thought, who are the fathers of ancient faded children, in those tanned time-fretted dwellings that crowd the steep before me; who pay their court in the worn and crumbling pomp of the palace which stretches its monotonous length on the height; who worship wearily in the stifling air of the churches, urged by no fear or hope, but compelled by their doom to be ever old and undying, to live on in the rigidity of habit, as they live on in perpetual midday, without the repose of night or the new birth of morning. (9)

Setting these grim tableaux against *The Mill*’s “sweet monotony,” we feel the shock as Eliot rescales her vision of the past’s “living on” from the personal to the interpersonal, from the span of one

---

23 Although many critics have also read the story as pursuing the consequences of Eliot’s project of sympathy. Terry Eagleton argues that *The Lifted Veil* shows how sympathy invidiously leads to solipsism: “Pressed to the caricaturing extremes of telepathy and prevision, sympathy merely rewrites large science’s lethal drive to confiscate its object, sucking it into its own turbulent subjectivity while leaving it in reality outside and resistant” (54). Rae Greiner argues that *The Lifted Veil* reveals the problem with an understanding of sympathy predicated on identification. Thomas Albrecht argues that “Latimer’s experiences would seem to contradict Eliot’s theory that art can and should enlarge our sympathy simply by granting us access to the thoughts and feelings of those around us” (439). Terry Eagleton, “Power and Knowledge in ‘The Lifted Veil’,” *Literature and History* 9, no. 1 (1983): 52–61; Rae Greiner, “Sympathy Time: Adam Smith, George Eliot, and the Realist Novel,” *Narrative* 17, no. 3 (October 2009): 291–311; Thomas Albrecht, “Sympathy and Telepathy: The Problem of Ethics in George Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil*,” *ELH* 73, no. 2 (2006): 437–63.
lifetime to the span of “centuries,” from natural renewal to artificial preservation. In *The Mill* the narrator’s past survives in delicate form, within “faint perceptions” of grass, sunshine, and elderberry bushes; even in Maggie’s reading the *Imitation of Christ* the ink is “browned” and the hand “quiet”; but in Latimer’s vision the forms of Prague’s past live on with unremitting force. Whatever “natural” objects belong to the scene have long since fixed into the artifice of eternity: “the summer sunshine … unrefreshed for ages” by night or by rain, “the broad river” (a term also used for the Floss) forged into “a sheet of metal.” Framed as a “scene” or “vision,” Latimer’s image of Prague not only contains art objects—the statues along Charles Bridge, even the city’s impressive architecture—but is itself reified as an art object. As such it is a high achievement: the ambitions of *Adam Bede*’s narrator to mirror the “monotonous … existence” of real people have been realized on a panoramic scale, from the homely to the grand; and Latimer’s hitherto “vague” ideas of Prague and his “ill-defined memories of [its] imperial grandeur” have transformed into a “wonderfully distinct vision” of the city in its sensuous reality.\(^{(24)}\) For all this, however, the passage is tinged with fear rather than elation.

But if we momentarily strip the scene of its general wash of horror, we can see its underlying humanist outline: Eliot is not employing gothic grisliness for its own sake but rather trying to work through the implications of her aesthetic humanism. In nearly every way Latimer’s vision responds to her hopes for art. The vision’s dominant images are all personal. Even before Latimer details the objects that impress him (the broad river, the blackened statues, the unending bridge, the time-fretted dwellings, the palace, the churches) he is struck by the ancient “people” associated with them. These “people” are the central feature of the scene, and Latimer imagines their feelings, families, and daily routines. The very fabric of the city is enmeshed with the personality of its past inhabitants: Latimer’s gaze has but to fall on a non-human object for it to reveal its human interest. And the things he sees are all accessible and mostly useful: the “dwellings” and the architecture facilitating civic life, the “statues” demonstrating art at its most literally “human.” Prague’s past

appears to Latimer not as a series of inherited ideas but in its material fullness, worn and faded to be sure, but not scrubbed of historical contingency. In Latimer’s vision of Prague we see Eliot’s hopes that art might faithfully reflect the past into the future as a personal and living presence, carefully and intimately realized. The “familiars” of The Mill, the ghostly people encountered for example in reading Thomas à Kempis, here take on almost fully-realized form in the strangely “undying” bodies of Prague’s past figures.

And yet clearly the vision does not glow with any of the soft tenderness that infuses The Mill’s “sweet monotony.” Rather, under the harsh glare of a “scorching” sun Latimer faces the figures of the past in all their degradation. As in Maggie’s and Tom’s childish dream, things are “always just the same,” but this sameness rings down the passage without any note of triumph. Latimer preserves the “grandeur of a people” from total obsolescence, and as such his vision formally replicates Eliot’s lovingly faithful historical representation. But this act is fraught with violence, as a “break” or an “arrest” that interferes with rather than furthers continuity. Like the double mirror “making still” what it replicates, the production of this scene involves a barely-veiled suggestion of murderous desecration. Lewes, as Eliot was working on The Mill and The Lifted Veil, argued that “every arrest is Death”: “The moment we preserve organic matter from destruction, we have rendered it incapable of the restless strivings of Life. A spirit like that of Faust seems ranging through all matter; and if ever it should say to the passing moment, ‘Stay! thou art fair,’ its career will be at an end” (Physiology of Common Life, 268). Lewes addresses physiology rather than art, but Eliot seems to recognize a similar problem as threatening her aesthetic ambition to imitate life as closely as possible. By forcing what is by nature “restlessly striving” into static form, the artist’s claim to verisimilitude is undermined, no matter how finely she renders every living detail. Nearer to home—aesthetically speaking that is—we can juxtapose Latimer’s “arrest” of the scene with Ruskin’s claim in Modern Painters, “Nothing can be natural which is monotonous” (Vol I, 2.2.16). Eliot, elsewhere so concerned to make room for monotony in art, here comes closest to Ruskin’s dismissal. “Stale repetition of memories,” “rigidity of habit,” “weary” routine: these descriptions fall in line with other writers’ disgust at sameness.
Latimer’s vision recalls Keats’s meditation on art’s relation to history in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which imagines the urn’s depicted figures to be similarly arrested in an endlessly repeated moment. At first this repetition is their happiness: they enjoy un consummated passion, and their “unwearied” joy separates them from the experience of “cloying” satiety that blights the pleasures of the living. But the figures’ repetitive “happy love! more happy, happy love!” ushers in the chilly turn that closes the poem; for all it portrays human activities, the “Cold Pastoral” is cut off from humanity, and can but stonily fix the green, flowing natural world in static form. Its work as “historian” depends on its artificial removal from the context it tries to represent. As a piece of historical fidelity Latimer’s vision has the edge on Keats’s urn: it captures life at all levels, from the “pomp of the palace” to the humbler “dwellings that crowd the steep,” rather than selecting a small group on a festival day; and instead of stripping the people he sees from their physical context, Latimer leaves Prague’s denizens right where they have always been—The Lifted Veil imagines no “emptied,” “desolate” town. Yet despite its panoramic realism and its relative preservation of historical context, Latimer’s vision is just as austere and comfortless as the urn’s. Eliot imagines the literal realization of her hopes for the past’s survival, the “endless vista” of the double mirror transposed into an “unending bridge” lined with human figures, but the very artifice necessary to create forms that endure renders their survival grotesque. However minutely it represents human life, in proportion as it outlasts that life art will eventually distort it, by separating it from the organic processes that order human development.

And Latimer’s vision differs from the urn in another crucial way. The figures on the urn do not yet register the processes of decay that will gradually chip and wear away their forms. But Prague’s old citizens are visibly wrought upon by time: “time-eaten,” “time-fretted,” “stale,” “superannuated,” clothed in “tatters,” and “compelled by their doom to be ever old and undying.”

---

In this doom Prague’s undead uncannily resemble the eponymous figure in Tennyson’s “Tithonus,” published a year after The Lifted Veil and itself a chastened rejoinder to Keats’s ode. Tithonus, in love with Aurora, asks for immortality that he may forever enjoy her. This he is granted, but unlike with Keats’s depicted lovers it is not given him to be “for ever young,” and he withers in his eternal age. Where Eliot briefly imagines the threadbare feelings of people “urged by no fear or hope,” for Tithonus being condemned to a superannuated life is unending misery. Envying “happy men that have the power to die,” Tithonus turns the tables on Keats’s “happy” lovers and recasts survival as weakness compared to the “power” to fade away entirely. To live on, withering each day but never reaching the oblivion of death, is horrible: “making the world a home for dimmed and faded human beings” may be no kindness after all.

And for all the apparent weakness of Prague’s ancient denizens, for all their crumbling and fretting under the hand of time, when we compare Latimer’s vision to what we have seen in The Mill on the Floss we notice a fundamental reversal in the relation of old sensations to new ones. In the narrator’s rhapsodies in The Mill, once-vivid sensations delicately influence us amidst the more striking force of newer things. But in The Lifted Veil the shapes of the city’s past press far more intently on Latimer than do the “busy, trivial men and women” of the present. Its ancient citizens seem “the real inhabitants and owners” of the city, and they dwarf the “ephemeral visitants” who briefly occupy what the earlier inhabitants built. Prague, in preserving the material structures of the past, makes visible how earlier lives continue to determine the present—how “the dead govern the living,” in Comte’s words. The reversal of priority from The Mill to The Lifted Veil is likewise noticeable in the image of sunshine which the texts share. In The Mill the sunlight is felt as a “faint perception,” but in Latimer’s vision it repeats itself insistently: “the broad sunshine,” “the summer sunshine,” “the perpetual midday,” a “scorching” force that renders the whole city “dusty,” “thirsty,” and “stifling.” Remembering Lewes’s description of unperceived or barely-perceived sensations as “the daylight of our existence,” we can see in this glaring midday an intimation of how

---

oppressive even faint perceptions can become when they are preserved against their own oblivion by being cast in fixed form and made to endure through time.

Thus in Latimer’s first vision in *The Lifted Veil*, we see Eliot uneasily working through the consequences of her aesthetic ideals for art by imagining a scene in which those ideals are fully realized. What if past human beings, however dimmed and faded, were able to continue on amidst present persons—what if the past, as strange as it sounds, could really “live on” in art? The imagined result is a scene of trauma. After centuries, the lives of Prague’s previous citizens are too removed from present-day concerns to be intelligible any longer; the statues gaze on the city’s current occupants with the same “monotonous light of an alien world” that menaces Dorothea in the “marble eyes” of the statues in Rome.27 These past people, crowded more and more into the city as nothing is lost, eventually overwhelm the “trivial men and women” whose existence is all-too-fleeting in relation to the lives of those dead who remain. Their final living on becomes a “doom,” a terrible judgment that withholds the gentle release of oblivion, and Eliot’s ideal art is recast an instrument of torture—both for the indefinitely revived people of the past, and for the suffering readers who have to listen to them.

I now move forward ten years from *The Lifted Veil* and *The Mill on the Floss*, to a little-known long poem of Eliot’s written in heroic couplets. In *The Legend of Jubal* Eliot continues to struggle with her humanist aesthetic creed, reformulated in grandly mythic terms. Only here, after having seen how entangling and suffocating a “twining” relation to the materials of the past can become, Eliot imagines severing our sensuous ties to it altogether. The myth of Jubal, the Founder of the Arts, reveals the culture of art to be established through a ritual murder of the past. As such, the poem deeply unsettles the basis of Eliot’s earlier aesthetic ideals.

Defacing Jubal

The Legend of Jubal, written in 1869 and published in Macmillan’s Magazine in 1870, is Eliot’s most openly secular literary work. Rather than locating human value in religion—something Eliot explores not only in The Mill but also in later fiction nearer to The Legend of Jubal, including Middlemarch (1874) and Daniel Deronda (1876)—the poem locates that value entirely in art. It contains one of the strongest statements of Eliot’s creed of aesthetic humanism, and it imagines art to take on a cultural role similar to the one Comte had prescribed for his Religion of Humanity, with its own traditions, rituals, and even temples. But for all this The Legend of Jubal is ultimately not a text about the triumph of an aesthetic sensitivity to the “dimmed and faded human beings” of the past, but about the failure of that sensitivity. In the poem’s ending, which is riven with ambiguity, the personification of the past is ritually defaced and ultimately murdered, in a bid to ward off its possessive “claim” on the present. I read The Legend of Jubal as a parable about what happens to feeble sensations that look for human attention: they get killed.

Given its pivotal role in Eliot’s theory of aesthetic experience, it’s surprising that so little critical attention has been devoted to The Legend of Jubal. Its overtly mythic aim allows Elliot to explore more fully than she does elsewhere art’s ideal creation and reception. And so before coming to the poem’s final episode, in which this ideal falls into hopeless confusion, I want to briefly recapitulate Eliot’s theory of art as laid out by the poem. This will orient us within the terms of a work less familiar to Eliot’s readers, and help us appreciate what is at stake in the its chaotic dénouement.

The Legend of Jubal spins out 791 lines from a mere four verses in Genesis 4:20–3, which describe the founding, respectively, of animal husbandry, art, and metallurgy by three sons of

Lamech, himself a descendent of Cain. In Eliot’s poem all three trades are founded after the sons—Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain—realize that they will die one day, stimulating them to create something that will outlive them. The poem opens on “Cain’s young city” before any but Cain knows about death. In their ignorance the citizens enjoy “glad idlesse,” in no haste to perform arduous labor when they have all the time in the world (l. 40). But one day Lamech kills one of his sons in an accident, “hurling stones in mere athletic joy” (l. 57). The others gather in horror around the dead man, and from that point their life changes. Fired by “new ambition,” Lamech’s remaining sons each turn to “fashion acts that are to be, / When we shall lie in darkness silently” (ll. 126–7). The function of the brothers’ “acts” resembles the work Susan Stewart marks out for lyric poetry, as a form that staves off the dark. Yet Eliot uses the word “act” rather than “form” (which would seem to be more apposite to “fashioning”). Her choice emphasizes the made form’s agency and actuality. Thus Eliot asserts an even stronger version of art than Stewart does, not as latently awaiting human contact but as actively perpetuating it, and not as buried in history but as participating in any present. This is clear in her description a few lines earlier of making a “shape that will abide / And rule above our graves” (ll. 122–3). This shape has present and continuing power.

Eliot’s claim to a stronger version of Stewart’s argument about poetry for all of art is evident as we move to the grounds of Jubal’s particular role as founder of “the Arts.” For where Jabal keeps company with his sheep, and where Tubal-Cain works at the forge while others sleep or take a holiday, by contrast Jubal’s craft essentially involves human interaction. The formal basis of Jubal’s art comes to him when he hears Tubal-Cain work at the forge, where the “melody” of the hammer and tongs affects him with “rapture” (ll. 251, 266). But these metallic sounds instantly take on human aspect: their “dumb longings” and “inward speech” become the song of

---


30 I mean “stronger” in the sense of having more propositional content, not in the sense of being more argumentatively forceful—quite the opposite in fact, as Eliot’s additional commitments to art’s agential and actual functions are part of what undermine her aesthetic agenda by the poem’s end.
an “external soul” (ll. 252, 257). From the forge Jubal wanders to the woods

And heard the birds their little stories sing
In notes whose rise and fall seem melted speech—
Melted with tears, smiles, glances … (ll. 271–3)

Once again inhuman sounds personify themselves for Jubal. This culminates in his going home to listen to “the fluctuant changes of the spoken word,” and with this final human influence he fashions a lyre and begins to sing, bringing his song to the gathered tribe. And in the listeners’ response, art’s foremost role in imaging the human form is likewise apparent. “Joy” joins the assembled people together (“embracing them in one entranced whole”) while preserving their individual differences (“yet thrilled each varying frame to various ends”) (ll. 419, 420). Part and whole of the social body perfectly correspond, and each listener stretches toward personal fullness in time. The old “recover” their past, as each “felt the sun / That warmed him when he was a little one,” while “younger limbs / Thrilled toward the future” (ll. 428–9, 432–3). Created in his awareness of human limits, Jubal’s art seeks above all to make an enduring and complete form of the human.

So Jubal creates the strongest and the most flexible incarnation of Eliot’s aesthetic ideal; his music stretches beyond temporary ends to nurture later “generations,” and it enshrines the human form in its personal and social fullness. Rather than simply echo itself, it also opens up to new influences: Jubal takes his show on the road, “sowing music” among other races and himself learning “new voices” that he might “bloom toward fuller fruit each year,” recalling the cultivation metaphors in *The Mill* above (ll. 506, 525, 488). His art grows far “wider” than its beginnings, making “the former songs seem little” (l. 531). And measured against this “widening” Jubal himself eventually becomes little and obsolete. He has grown old, his fingers and voice weakening with age, and after centuries of wandering he decides to return home to the “welcome” he is sure his tribe will give him. With this homecoming Eliot tests the possibility of a continuous relation between old and new: the “withered,” “outworn” Jubal will meet the “fresh-voiced youth” who have developed
new music after him (ll. 561, 565, 537). But this meeting will end in violence; Jubal, the ancient songster who figures music’s past, is brutally rejected by his younger descendants.

Jubal’s chilly reception is best measured against the other, earlier instance in Eliot’s fiction of a figure who comes home after a lapse of centuries: *Romola* opens in considering the feelings a fifteenth-century Florentine citizen would have if he returned to modern-day Florence. As Jubal does, *Romola*’s narrator imagines that the Florentine “would believe that there must still be fellowship and understanding for him among the inheritors of his birthplace” (2). This belief in “fellowship”—in a culture of feeling that “makes the world a home for dimmed and faded human beings,” to revisit the narrator’s later words—is supported by the Florentine’s experience of sensory continuity: “as he looks at the scene before him, the sense of familiarity is so much stronger than the perception of change” (10). Jubal’s homecoming begins with a similar sense of familiarity, as the hills of “the well-known land” greet him with “friendly faces” and “familiar gaze,” and he finds “the selfsame insect broods” and the “selfsame cuckoo” from his early years (ll. 569, 571, 574, 576). But Eliot carries us beyond this and thus beyond her earlier claims to human fellowship in *Romola*.

As Jubal moves closer to the city, now a buzzing metropolis, his feeling of familiarity falters:

He saw dread Change, with dubious face and cold
That never kept a welcome for the old,
Like some strange heir upon the hearth, arise
Saying, “This home is mine.” (ll. 584–7)

The earth “embraced” him, but as he crosses the threshold of civilization Jubal is given the cold shoulder. The world is still personified here: “Change” has a “face” and a “home,” but this personification no longer guarantees a warm greeting as it did in *The Mill*. Eliot’s earlier careful accommodation of new to old fails—indeed in the simile of the “strange heir” the situation is exactly that there is no “accommodation” for Jubal. This failure happens on the level of sensation:

… He thought his eyes
Mocked all deep memories, as things new made,
Usurping sense, make old things shrink and fade
And seem ashamed to meet the staring day. (ll. 587–90)

The “deep immoveable roots in memory” which fed our “striving” in *The Mill*, have been torn up, and Eliot’s botanic metaphor is replaced by figures of human intrigue: mockery, usurpation, shame, staring. The “shrinking and fading” of old things under the violent pressure of novelty can no longer be stayed even by love; the narrator remarks how “the sense slips off from each loved thing, / And all appearance is mere vanishing” (ll. 687–9). The account of sensation here finally falls in line with physiological “law.” No sooner does a sensation “appear” in our notice but it begins the process of vanishing from the same. Its “slipping off” indicates a noiseless, deft passage out of the net of conscious regard, despite the vigilant gaze of love.

Thus far we have seen the laws of sensation change from within Jubal’s perceptual experience. But as he descends further into the “monster huge” of the sprawling city the poem’s allegory reasserts itself, and Jubal becomes himself like an old sensation in human form—something we have seen throughout Eliot’s earlier works (l. 597). In *The Lifted Veil* we are guided in a brief meditation of what it would be like if art were actually alive; here we see Jubal, a figure for early music, fully personified in his encounter with later listeners. Eliot’s language indicates this shift: from Jubal’s perspective we have seen memories “mocked,” and things “shrink and fade” against “staring”; soon Jubal himself will be stared at and mocked, and soon he will be the one to shrink and fade. Thus Jubal weirdly gives readers a feeling for what it is like to be a faint perception, what it is like to be a “loved thing” vanishing away.

And yet Jubal returns on a day when arguably that love is at its strongest. Over his long absence he has become a saint, and as he enters the city he collapses next to a temple which is being dedicated in his honor—it is his festal day.\(^\text{31}\) As he lies there he hears from a distance the worshippers approaching the temple, chanting his name. Whatever ambitions Jubal had for the future of his art, he lives to see them amply fulfilled:

\(^{31}\)We might compare Jubal to one of Comte’s “saints of humanity,” whose names Eliot had copied down into a liturgical calendar.
... the broadening stream
Of sound advancing was his early dream,
Brought like fulfilment of forgotten prayer. (ll. 609–11)

But we have seen broad streams before—St. Ogg’s Floss and Prague’s Vltava—and know how treacherous they can be. Here the “broadening,” “advancing” stream of sound reminds us once again of how small and antiquated Jubal is now in relation to the art he founded. The narrator emphasizes this contrast with a heavy hand: the “new-raised temple” built of “fragrant ... cedar-wood” towers over Jubal’s “withered” frame, which is “gaunt” as “oaks slow dying”; the liquid “stream” of song “pours” and “rolls” near “the aged man adust” on “the dry withered grass”; Jubal’s “faint” “thinnest treble” is “dumb” next to the “full-fraught strain” of the young singers (ll. 600–1, 566, 625, 634-5, 604, 568, 633).

Jubal’s slipping out of the sense of his followers, even as they laud his name all the louder, is marked by their apparent inability (or unwillingness) to notice him by the side of his temple. The “face-to-face” encounter, so central to Eliot’s hope that art could bring us into personal contact with the past, fails repeatedly: “the aged man adust upon the bank— / Whom no eye saw”; and later, “For no eye saw him, while with loving pride— / Each voice with each in praise of Jubal vied” (ll. 635–6, 661–2). The substitution of symbolic idea (the name “Jubal”) for reality is total: “Jubal” “to the inward ken / Of all the human train was present there,” while Jubal the actual person is perversely overlooked (ll. 666–7). In a bitter simile, the narrator describes how “that wondrous frame where melody began / Lay as a tomb defaced that no eye cared to scan” (ll. 605–6, emphasis mine). By not looking at him the crowd ritually strips Jubal’s body of its humanity. Instead they accord it to the structure that symbolizes him, “wheeling towards the temple’s face” (l. 673). Where our memory of sunshine in The Mill helps rivet us to the “faint perceptions” of sunlight today, here the fixed memory of Jubal, handed down across generations, effaces any recognition of his dimmed and faded physical self. As the symbol of Jubal gathers intensity, the human reality loses the same.

But despite the crowd’s disregard Jubal will not retire quietly: “His flesh cried out to live with living men” (l. 665). All that we know about Eliot would lead us to believe that she would
endorse this cry, and that Jubal’s piteous appeal should be read as providing an opportunity to cultivate our sensitivity to dimmed and faded things. And certainly the poem builds the eventual encounter between Jubal and his followers along these lines. We expect Jubal to be given pity: although “his song should spread from man’s small race / Out through the myriad worlds that people space,” yet “still ‘mid that vast would throb the keen desire / Of this poor aged flesh” that “ached smallness still in good that had no bound” (ll. 651–2, 654–5, 660). The elision between “man’s small race” and the “smallness” of Jubal’s particular ache makes this pity all the more pressing. What Eliot describes here is an analogous problem of scale, and surely, just as we would expect “man’s small race” to receive due recognition even amidst “the myriad worlds” of the cosmos, so too Jubal’s smallness should not preclude finding a place for him in this larger society. Yet Jubal’s desire for attention is complex, touching and demanding in one. He longs

To claim his fuller self, to claim the deed
That lived away from him, and grew apart,
While he as from a tomb, with lonely heart,
Warmed by no meeting glance, no hand that pressed,
Lay chill amid the life his life had blessed. (ll. 646–50)

Jubal’s modest need for the most basic marks of human fellowship—for a “glance” or for the press of a welcoming “hand”—mixes with other desires whose threat we can recognize in The Lifted Veil’s possessive light. His twice-repeated “claim” looms near to the ancient citizens’ “ownership” of Prague or, more darkly yet, the Roman art that “takes possession” of Dorothea’s sense, while the legal resonance of “deed” and “claim” reminds us of the “dead hands” of Featherstone and Casaubon in that novel, which stretch through their wills to bind the living.32 Read in this context, Jubal’s weak pleading appears similarly colored with menacing overtones, implying that to grant even his mild desire for fellowship would be to surrender to an oppressive bid for dominance.

32Hertz writes about the resonance of the word “claim” in Eliot’s works, arguing that “the gesture of claiming” is “insistently linked with the physical act of grasping” (142). This sense of Jubal’s physical hold on his descendants furthers the pathos of their rejection and yet makes it more understandable.
Thus when Jubal leaps in front of the gathered crowd and cries out, “I am Jubal, I!” their response is swiftly vindictive (l. 676). They laugh at the old man’s pretensions, and then their derision turns to “anger” at his “mockery” and “profanation”:

Two rushed upon him: two, the most devout
In honor of great Jubal, thrust him out,
And beat him with their flutes. ’Twas little need;
He strove not, cried not, but with tottering speed,
As if the scorn and howls were driving wind
That urged his body, serving so the mind
Which could but shrink and yearn, he sought the screen
Of thorny thickets, and there fell unseen. (ll. 697–704)

Rather than treat Jubal’s cry for attention with pity, the crowd responds with naked aggression. The apparent frailty of the old man—his voice a “feeble bell,” his body “tottering”—does not forestall their receiving him as a threat (l. 678). They violently “beat” him back into his proper place, into the background of their consciousness, until he returns to being “unseen.” His desire to live on is rejected, and “Jubal lonely laid him down to die” (l. 706).

This episode is horrifying not just in its literal content—a mob beats an old man to death—but in the flatness with which the poem relates this horror. The crowd continue to worship as Jubal dies in the thicket, and the narrator not only treats this shocking disjunction with apparent calm, but actually tries to paper it over with a moralizing consolation in which Jubal is told that although his body will be destroyed, his symbolic presence will live on. We get no indication that the crowd was wrong to lash out as they did—if anything, the narrator’s tone indicates that their reaction was simply a matter of course. That this reading is even available to us (let alone as the most natural interpretation of the episode) is shocking: Eliot’s fiction, usually so passionately attentive to the needs of weak things, here seems to tolerate coolly their desecration. Jubal’s body is left to rot unseen, as a supposedly-comforting spirit assures him at the poem’s end: “Thy limbs shall lie dark, tombless on this sod, / Because thou shinest in man’s soul, a god” (ll. 776–7). (Earlier a “tomb defaced,” now Jubal has lost even the common decency of burial.) In the narrator’s acceptance

123
of this fate we have come far from Eliot’s earlier hope to place fading sensations at the center of aesthetic experience.

Curiously, it is their very piety that leads Jubal’s worshippers to cast his degraded body from their midst. It is “the most devout” who set upon him, and their righteous indignation arises from their desire to keep “Jubal” the symbol from decay:

Jubal was but a name in each man’s faith
For glorious power untouched by that slow death
Which creeps with creeping time … (ll. 691–3)

The implication latent in Latimer’s vision—that to artificially “arrest” the past is to do it violence—is literalized here. To revere past forms is also to defile them: we cannot say “Stay! thou art fair,” to any loved thing without also wishing its death. Eliot seems to accept this in The Legend of Jubal, even as she acknowledges its tragic consequences, as Jubal’s followers fix him into a name that is figured apart from his weakening physical frame. In riving symbol from body they exorcise any ghosts like the ones who menace Prague, rejecting contact with the past on familiar human terms. The symbol they create is of a force “untouched,” something severed from the human world with its needs for looking, hearing, holding. Eliot turns, doubtfully, from an earlier conception of art as enabling pleasure in familiar sensations, to an idea of art as forging a symbolic power that dwells apart from fragile human things. Yet she allows readers to feel the desecration of this act, the way it murders the past as a “quiet hand,” “low voice,” or “living companion.”

Eliot moves away from the indefinite forms of what is familiar—for her, the “booming” of the mill and the “dreamy deafness” it brings, for Wordsworth a “shapeless” heap of stones, for Tennyson a “half-dream”—towards recovering an idea of distinctive form that throws off the weak accidents of material context. To treat the past as still alive in some sense, to acknowledge its wishes, desires, and designs on us, is to give over too much of ourselves. Lingering, twining, staying attached, are ways of getting too involved with things that may engulf us just as Maggie is swallowed alive by the Floss. A neater way of relating to the past is found in clean-cut memory, something that can be carried along with us without being so heavy as to slow us down, rather
than something that we live among. “Jubal” the symbol is adapted to his worshippers’ present-day needs, fitted to their new temple, and not fundamentally constrained by the predisposed order of his personality. Yet read against Eliot’s earlier pleas for an art essentially bound to faded materiality, the poem’s concluding spiritualization of Jubal’s legend feels like a gift box prettily wrapped but with nothing inside:

“This was thy lot, to feel, create, bestow,
And that immeasurable life to know
From which the fleshly self falls shrivelled, dead,
A seed primeval that has forests bred.” (ll. 770–3)

Although the “Soul” that tells Jubal this is described as meeting him with a “face of love,” that love no longer serves in any way to keep him alive. Here the spirit rather coaxes Jubal out of his human form, delivering him of voice, hand, face. The faint remnant of sensation, once cherished by Eliot as the very sign of the human, is now carelessly cast aside. Jubal’s flesh is a husk, peeled off from the more important idea within. And yet Jubal’s “godhead,” his supposed spiritual presence among his followers, feels like an unsatisfying resolution to a work that commences with such a dark picture of divinity in the harsh Jehovah. The poem ends with a fade-to-white, with Jubal growing “fainter” until he enters “the All-creating Presence” while a choir sings around him (ll. 789, 791). But this shrill comfort is not the image that persists most strongly after the poem’s end: rather what persists is the gruesome vision of Jubal’s “tombless,” “gaunt,” “shrivelled,” “feeble,” “outcast” body. And if we see this image with a rush of pity for his bereft, fleshly form, we are not to be blamed: it was George Eliot, after all, who taught us how.

Conclusion

The Legend of Jubal is not Eliot’s final pronouncement on an issue she continues to struggle with for the rest of her literary career, in trying to shape art’s relation to the past and to describe its bearing on human value. But it is the farthest she goes towards a theory of aesthetic detachment, in which
art is ideally severed from its commitments to keeping the past alive and in which aesthetic objects such as Jubal’s songs find their value in symbolizing abstract power, pointing toward the possibility of future human achievement rather than the weakness of past human reality. The Legend of Jubal opens with a description of “love” as an emotion without “haste,” “lingering” because it “loved not change”; but the poem closes with a recognition that change is both inevitable and morally necessary in spite of love (ll. 53, 52, 56). The “broadening,” “advancing” “stream of sound” widens outward in a visible picture of the civilized “striving” that Eliot’s narrator had distanced herself from in The Mill, and the counter-culture of feeling formed by twining attachments is left behind. This shift is framed in relation to a new kind of responsibility, an intention to work towards the moral superiority of what Eliot describes as a “fellowship” of “equal perfectness” purifed of human weakness (l. 765). The “infant babblings” and “glad idlesse” that characterize Cain’s city before its inhabitants become aware of death, which indicate early society as a kind of Lotos land kept apart from the press of civilizing expansion, are forgotten by the poem’s end as belonging to a lower moral order: Eliot seems to say that there are some things more important than lingering in love.

In many ways Eliot goes farther than Wordsworth or Tennyson in committing her art to a project of conserving pleasure in familiar sensations. For the two earlier writers an interest in the pleasures of lingering, or of staying behind with what seems to fade, appears more as an occasional experiment than a protracted development of an aesthetics of attachment such as the one Eliot explores through most of her early fiction. But of these three writers Eliot is also the one who calls the viability of aesthetic attachment most seriously into doubt. Her sense of just how entangling a “twining” relation to familiar contexts can be, understands attachment to pose a serious threat to social advancement. In this shift we can also measure a larger cultural change in the understanding of our psychological dependence on the past. For Burke and Wordsworth the imagination has to be disciplined to engage steadily with long-enduring forms and to find its pleasure in quiet continuity rather than in deviation or dislocation. For Tennyson, somewhere in the middle between these early writers and Eliot, the mariners’ self-becalming signals a willed resistance to the exhausting discipline of cultural discovery. But for Eliot, who was well abreast of psychological developments
describing the massive force of unconscious experience in our lives, the mind was more naturally weighted towards what it knows than what it doesn’t—even if the former plays less of a role in full consciousness. The difficult thing in her fiction is to emerge from familiar context to press on towards a new world, something which each of Eliot’s central characters struggle with, to differing ends. *The Legend of Jubal* marks its own importance in this ongoing struggle, although that importance is measured through the life of a civilization rather than an individual. At the poem’s end the narrator describes Jubal as a “quenched sun-wave”: here the “daylight of our existence,” all of the things that mother our looking—the sunshine in the far-off years, or the scorching light of an alien world—goes out, so that Jubal’s descendants might learn to light their own way.
Epilogue

Although we’re a long way from the nineteenth century, the idea that art owes us novelty has largely persisted. Critics now are more likely to focus on formal innovation than on the more nebulous category of “new sensations,” but we still ask “great” art to tell us something we didn’t know before, or to change our perception of the world. Alexander Nehamas compares two different ways of conceptualizing our relation to art: one likening it to erotic passion, which he traces back to Plato and Plotinus, and another advocating a disinterested approval separated from the concerns of everyday life, which he associates with Kant, Schopenhauer, and the birth of the “aesthetic” in the eighteenth century. Nehamas aims to restore the passionate Platonic approach to our interaction with art, and describes our feeling towards beauty as a lover’s desire to possess the beloved:

And then, all of a sudden, everything becomes background—everything but a pair of eyes, a face, a body, pushing the rest out of your field of vision and giving you a moment of awe and a shock of delight, perhaps even passionate longing. For a moment, at least, you are looking at beauty.\(^{33}\)

Nehamas distinguishes this lover’s “desire to possess” from a darker “wish to dominate, exploit, and manipulate” which he links to consumerism; the latter uses objects “as a means to one’s own ends” while the former “values objects for themselves” (55) And yet he ends up establishing the love of art on its own quid pro quo basis. Art, Nehamas argues, pleases us because it offers us “the promise of happiness,” a future potentially better than our present. And once this “forward-looking”

expectation evaporates, our love evaporates along with it: “beauty … withers when it can promise nothing it has not given already, and signals the fading of love. For love, as Proust wrote … ‘is born, it lives, only for so long as there is something left to conquer. We love only that which we do not wholly possess’” (63).

Nehamas strongly contrasts his own description of passionate longing with post-Kantian disinterested approaches to art (although he makes exceptions here and there, for Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde), and in so doing he misses just how much the future-directed, passionate and possessive attitude he celebrates is in fact derived from eighteenth and nineteenth-century conceptions of the aesthetic. There may have been a “high,” post-Kantian tradition of aesthetic remove, but mainstream approaches to art still involved a desire for aesthetic ecstasy in the conquest of an exotic other, and a eagerness to move on when a given object had nothing more to offer. (Nehamas’s description of the moment when “everything becomes background” as characteristic of aesthetic desire is anticipated for instance by Lord Kames’s equally erotic account of how a “new spectacle … produceth instantaneously an emotion which totally occupies the mind, and for a time excludes all other objects. The soul seems to meet the strange appearance with a certain elongation of itself.”34) Nehamas’s distinction between a consumer’s and a lover’s passion seems to falter on this latter point—the lover doesn’t actually want to stay with the object for its own sake, but rather for the further hope of pleasure.

Against an anticipatory relation to aesthetic objects which enjoys them according to their capacity to offer further knowledge, the writers I have taken up in this dissertation all imagine finding aesthetic pleasure in things in all their familiarity. Like Nehamas, they explore intimate, knowing attachments to objects, but unlike the end-oriented engagement he describes they look to a relation that will endure. They develop an aesthetic vocabulary of slight sensations, which shape a world of feeling not just at our fingertips but even within our very skin—whether in Burke’s pressure of the air we breathe, Wordsworth’s pleasure which there is in life itself, Tennyson’s thrumming

34 Lord Henry Home Kames, Elements of Criticism. (Edinburgh: for A. Kincaid & J. Bell, 1762).
heartbeat, or Eliot’s dreamy deafness. These feelings are both sustained and sustaining, shaped around their own continuance rather than oriented towards the promise of change. They are found in narratives of attachment, in which figures stay behind with what they know rather than press on to what they don’t; and thus each writer I look at unspools narrative time, even if only briefly, from the warp and weft of eventful nineteenth-century plots. These writers reframe stories around love and faithful persistence, and discover within these affective commitments a mode of perception on the edge of what is sensible. Like Tennyson’s “amber light / Which will not leave the myrrh-bush on the height,” they are reluctant to leave behind whatever they have touched, holding to it even at the end of day. Rather than looking towards a new beginning, they give us series of forms for lingering with things before they end: in the remains of an unfinished sheepfold, in the circular airs of Lotos land, and in a root system twining down to early memory.
References


———. “To the Editor of the India Gazette.” *India Gazette*, May 1790.


Coit, Emily. “‘This Immense Expense of Art’: George Eliot and John Ruskin on Consumption and the Limits of Sympathy.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65, no. 2 (September 2010): 214–45.


———. *The Rambler*, no. 78 (December 1750).


———. *The History of British India*. London: James Madden, 1858.


