LEAVE-TAKINGS:

ANTI-SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE ESCAPIST ENDS

OF THE VICTORIAN MARRIAGE PLOT

Ariana Elaine Reilly

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Advisor: Deborah Epstein Nord

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Abstract

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reevaluates the critical history of the marriage plot by focusing on its investment in alternatives to self-conscious subjectivity, and argues that authors and readers turned to the marriage plot in order to escape a burdensome but unavoidable state of self-doubt and introspection. Highlighting the centrality of Carlyle’s “theory of anti-self-consciousness” to the Victorian marriage plot, *Leave-takings* not only recognizes a popular genre’s serious participation in philosophical debate but also delineates a less-gendered plotline, thereby avoiding the tired teleology of critical studies that persistently equate the marriage plot with the domestic *Bildungsroman*. The first chapter, “A Romance Re-Tailored: *Sartor Resartus* and the Love Letters of Jane and Thomas Carlyle,” introduces Carlyle’s theory of anti-self-consciousness and, drawing on letters the Carlyles exchanged during their courtship, argues that this theory, most fully articulated in *Sartor*, grew out of what amounted to an extended epistolary theorization of marriage. Having thus demonstrated the deep connection between anti-self-consciousness and matrimony, *Leave-Takings* explores the treatment of anti-self-consciousness in four Victorian novels: *Mary Barton*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, and *Romola*. In particular, the dissertation demonstrates that romantic desire in the Victorian novel often merges with a desire to escape the self. The second chapter, “Working Through: Anti-Self-Conscious Labors of Body and Mind in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*,” attends to the way in which Gaskell’s text simultaneously preaches and critiques Carlyle’s Gospel of Work as it tries to envision anti-self-consciousness as a product of labor and state of marital bliss. The third chapter, “Leave Sunny Imaginations Hope: Anti-Self-Consciousness, Escapist Reading, and Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* and *Villette,*” considers how the reader’s escapist desire finds its reflection in the anti-self-conscious desire of literary heroines. *Leave-
Takings concludes by considering the legacy of Victorian anti-self-consciousness in contemporary criticism. The coda, “Critical Escapism, Surface Reading, and George Eliot’s Romola,” asks whether the descriptive turn is also an escapist one, and ponders the professional and political implications of the anti-self-conscious fantasy of objectivity.
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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wished you could simply turn off your mind? That you could escape being in your own head, aware of your own thoughts? This feeling, so familiar and yet so difficult to describe, is at the center of my dissertation, which explores the Carlylean concept of “anti-self-consciousness” in the Victorian novel. *Leave-takings: Anti-Self-Consciousness and the Escapist Ends of the Victorian Marriage Plot* challenges the common assumption that marriage endings signal either self-realization or its social impossibility, arguing instead that the Victorian novel presents marriage as an escape from such self-realization, or more accurately, from the relentless self-consciousness required of modern subjectivity. At the intersection of secular and divine experience, both a rite of passage and an eternally binding vow, marriage, I argue, was well-suited to the task of bodying forth within the mundane realm of the realist novel a barely conceivable state of being—lasting un-self-consciousness, an eternal freedom from introspection and self-doubt. Without straying far from familiar matrimonial associations, the Victorian novel could unite the escapist desire for self-less being with the romantic desire for self-consuming love. Though Victorian poetry also engaged with anti-self-consciousness, the novel was uniquely capable of inducing a reading experience that approximated, in its absorbing intensity, the complete suspension of self-conscious awareness. In the chapters that follow on Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, and Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* and *Villette*, the project explores the interpretive possibilities of anti-self-consciousness and a critical approach sensitive to escapism and other popular reading practices. Ultimately, *Leave-takings* argues that the familiar stories of domestic self-realization are simultaneously metaphysical allegories of self-annihilation.
Studies of the Victorian novel and its cultural milieu rarely disagree about the period’s deep literary commitment to self-making. Andrew Miller is in good company when he states that the nineteenth-century novel “owed much of its cultural centrality” to the ability to help readers “realize an ideal self” by identifying (and identifying with) a fictional exemplar to guide them in their mission of moral perfectionism. Though his argument is unique in its particulars, his casual assumption that “the most distinctive generic development” of the nineteenth-century novel was “the Bildungsroman” (19) joins him to Ian Watt and countless critics since (and before), who yoke the “rise of the novel” to a concurrent rise of “the individual” in eighteenth and nineteenth-century culture and philosophy. Even critics interested in alternative relationships between literature and subjectivity rest their case on the assumption that canonical Victorian fiction narrated the “idyll of the bourgeois literary ‘I’” (Gagnier 223)\textsuperscript{1}. While often vociferously disagreeing on such fiction’s philosophical and political implications, most critics find common ground in their shared assumption that Victorian pens shed their ink in service of the bourgeois subject.

While this dissertation does not deny that many Victorian novels were invested in a project of this sort, it does complicate this received wisdom by emphasizing a parallel and contradictory project of self-annihilation not subordinated to or dependent upon the primacy of the bildungsroman. By self-annihilation, I do not mean the kind of repression and self-denial that nineteenth-century etiquette manuals have encouraged us to understand as part of self-betterment and thus self-realization. Nor do I mean the kind of introspective masochism that John Kucich and others have linked to an enriching of the self’s inner life. Rather, I mean self-annihilation as it was used by Thomas Carlyle in Sartor Resartus (1831), as the difficult (and often painful) process by which the individual achieves “anti-self-consciousness”—a state of being defined by
its strident refusal of self-awareness, and sometimes even self-knowledge. This narrative of anti-self-consciousness finds its impetus in an alternative (and very Victorian) desire to escape subjectivity altogether, or to return to Miller’s terminology, to lay down the “burden” not only of moral perfectionism but of “self” altogether.

Paying special attention to the marriage plot, a genre often co-opted as a sub-genre of the *bildungsroman*, I present two co-dependent arguments in the chapters that follow. First, a notable subset of Victorian novels articulates an almost suicidal desire in response to extreme exhaustion from always carrying the burden of modern self-consciousness. Far from being re-incorporated into the more clearly recognizable narrative of individualism, this radical dream expresses itself most emphatically at the end of the novel. By bringing the early writings of Carlyle to bear on the plots of several canonical Victorian novels, I demonstrate that the marriage ending we often interpret either as an achievement or failure of self-realization actually is neither. Rather, it embodies another fantasy altogether, that of an everlasting anti-self-consciousness. Never narrating far beyond the wedding day, the typical marriage plot realizes (or appears to realize) a permanent state of selfless, outward-directed being.

Second, by refusing to understand the reader’s relationship to the text in terms of identification and exemplarity alone, I question the basic assumption that the Victorian novel makes any of the following subjects: liberal, bourgeois, modern, coherent, ideal, or even fragmented, divided, and impossible. Instead, I argue that the “coming universal wish not to live” (*Jude* 326) expressed by Father Time in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, that is, the wish not to be a subject or experience one’s subjectivity, was already a familiar Victorian fantasy, albeit in a less gruesome form. Accordingly, I take seriously the desire that fuels the widely discounted experience of the escapist reader. Just as common in the Victorian era as they are today, this
class (I use the word advisedly) of popular readers come to novels not in order to understand or improve the self but in order to forget self entirely. Absorbed reading approximates the elusive experience of anti-self-conscious being (non-being). For escapist readers, the end of the novel realizes the fantasy of everlasting anti-self-consciousness at the same time that it returns them to self-conscious awareness. While narratives of self-escape share the political ambivalences of narratives of self-making, it is only by recognizing the presence of both that we can begin to understand the relationship between the Victorian novel and nineteenth or twenty-first-century selfhood.

The Bildungsroman

What is the connection between the following two quotations—stripped as they are of context and citation?

1. But the hero of the classical *Bildungsroman*, . . . ‘wants to find his place in the world, his own place, and seeks after a life which is reasonable for him. . .’ His compass is personal happiness, and the plot that will permit him to realize it will follow the model of *organic integration*.

2. The individual becomes estranged from the family and the political community, he becomes a mystery to himself and then he cannot escape the annoying and agonizing question: what is the point of it all?

The answer seems simple enough. The “hero of the classical *Bildungsroman,*” as described in the first quotation, begins his story with the situation and outlook expressed in the second quotation. In other words, the second quotation introduces us to a prime candidate for the position of *bildungsroman* hero. It is only when young men and women recognize themselves as separate from their families and communities and thus begin thinking for themselves and questioning their purpose in life, that they search out a place to fit in, a place (physically and mentally) where they can define themselves and their values and, perhaps, be happy. And yet, while the first
quotation can be found in Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, the second appears in the pages of Emile Durkheim’s 1897, *On Suicide*. Far from describing the incipient hero of the *bildungsroman*, the individual introduced to us in Durkheim’s text exhibits a certain kind of suicidal character—the character likely to commit an “egotistical suicide.” This new variety of suicide, Durkheim explains, is part and parcel of western modernity and its culture of individualism. The same feelings that urge the hero of the *bildungsroman* to form a coherent identity also urge the egotistical suicide to take his own fragmented life. Indeed, we might say that the narrative of self-making and the narrative of self-destruction begin at the exact same point. They are structural inverses or mirror images.

To the extent that many continental and early British *bildungsromans* end, like *Sorrows of Young Werther*, in precisely what Durkheim would term an egotistical suicide, this observation is unsurprising. As Moretti observes, British Romantics, the French, and the Germans were skeptical about the ability of the individual to realize selfhood within the ranks of normative society, and thus these tales often end tragically. He presents the Victorians, however, as deeply committed to solving the problem of self and society. The plotted events and encounters of Victorian novels subtly inculcate the protagonist with the values of the society he or she originally finds alienating. The narrative enables societal regulations to be internalized gradually and un-reflectively until protagonist and reader alike conflate the demands of the society with the desires of the self. In this way, the classic Victorian *bildungsroman* plasters over the gap between individuals and their individualistic societies. Finding its fruition in a social ritual, i.e., marriage, personal desire appears to flow seamlessly into socially prescribed channels. According to Moretti, suicide is not a Victorian solution. Nevertheless, suicide haunts the Victorian novel, and especially the marriage plot, in the specter of the fallen woman who
frequently functions as the heroine’s double, a haunting reminder that courtship narratives can lead to the grave as well as the alter.

**The Marriage Plot**

Nancy K. Miller’s *The Heroine’s Text*, a slim pink volume of scholarship published in 1980, seems to have quietly slipped into the public consciousness. At least my undergraduates, none of whom have heard of Miller, arrive in the classroom fully aware of her central claim—the Victorian novel has only two outcomes for its heroines: marriage or death. We are familiar with the argument before we read the book, and yet, *The Heroine’s Text* repays the critic willing to revisit its early account of the binary “inscription of a female destiny” (x) in the eighteenth-century novel, if only because it spells out the widely accepted schema within or against which we read most eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts. For Miller the heroine’s text follows a logic of “either/or closure” (xi), and the heroine chooses from two plots, both determined by their ending. The “euphoric text”—Richardson’s *Pamela*, for example—constitutes “a feminine variant of the *Bildung*” that “integrate[s]” the heroine “into society” (xi). The “dysphoric text”—Richardson’s *Clarissa*—narrates a descent ending in real or metaphorical death (xi). Whether this death comes to an actual fallen woman or metaphorically to a woman whose marriage signifies the death of her individual existence, the “either/or closure” identified by Miller continues to structure critical responses to eighteenth and nineteenth-century courtship novels. If a novel from this period does not follow one of these two trajectories, its unconventional ending is almost certain to have dominated its treatment in the critical conversation for the last forty years. It is hard to imagine, for example, an argument about *Villette* or *Daniel Deronda* that left out a reading of their unique endings. More importantly, we continue to understand the figure of
the fallen woman or the selfless bride as narrative and social failures. We follow Miller in theorizing the heroine’s text, and particularly the marriage plot, within the terms and structure of the *bildungsroman*. When a character fails to realize a self in an individualistic society, we automatically assume that the only reason for this failure is to be found in the social constraints and inequalities of that society. We do not question whether the individuals in that society desire such selfhood in the first place.

Miller’s most direct critical descendant, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, demonstrates both of these tendencies in her 1985 *Writing Beyond the Ending* when she writes that in nineteenth-century novels about women “the *Bildung*, [was] set aside or repressed, whether by marriage or death” (3-4). DuPlessis’s major critique relies on her assumption that the nineteenth-century novel should be a *bildungsroman*. Critics such as Nancy Armstrong and D. A. Miller revamp the work of second wave feminists like Nancy Miller and DuPlessis for the more theoretically demanding audiences of the late 1980s and ‘90s with a Foucauldian nightmare of ideological structures, but the innovation is not as radical as it first appears. For Armstrong, the eighteenth and nineteenth-century novel disguised its bourgeois socio-political message as a sexual morality tale in which the virtuous woman legitimates the bid of the rising middle class for power even as the middle class morality she represents narrows the possibilities of her lived future. Less dependent on gender, D. A. Miller’s argument still focuses on the uncomfortable relationship between selfhood and servitude. At the very moment the protagonist appears to realize her identity as a desiring agent—by marrying the partner of her choice—she conforms to her prescribed role and subsumes her identity under that of the man she loves. The Victorian novel seeks to “confirm the novel-reader in his identity as ‘liberal subject’” but does so (much as Moretti argued above) through a kind of narrative trickery. For both Armstrong and D. A. Miller
the *bildungsroman* structures the interpretation of character and reader alike. The novel’s narrative of self-making may be a lie pandering to the middle classes, but the lie’s efficacy in obscuring social discipline still depends upon the assumption that self-realization is the lie that novels want to tell and, what’s more, the lie that readers want to hear.

More recent scholarship oscillates between the carceral and rebellious take on nineteenth-century endings, but no major reassessment of the marriage plot ending or novelistic closure in the period more generally has appeared in the last twenty years, a fact that seems to suggest the field’s satisfaction with the available theoretical paradigms of “the end.” It shouldn’t be. Our deeply engrained tendency to read the marriage plot as a *bildungsroman*, on the one hand, and in terms of its effects on its readers, on the other, has profoundly limited our ability to understand the marriage plot’s tenacity as a literary form. In addition to reading the marriage plot as a product of gendered ideology, we need to read it as a product of a philosophical debate about the nature and desirability of selfhood and the self-consciousness it demands. Indeed, we need to understand it in dialogue with Thomas Carlyle’s theory of anti-self-consciousness and his own strange literary and non-literary marriage plots.

**Anti-Self-Consciousness**

Despite its *critical* legacy of self and subject-making, the Victorian novel promised readers, writers, and characters the alluring balm of self-escape. Its pull towards *bildung* was constantly opposed by a pull towards self-negation. Instead of turning inwards in search of a transcendent reconciliation with self-consciousness, Victorian characters and readers looked outwards, absorbing themselves in the real and imagined lives of others in order to ward off a morbid self-consciousness and prevent the mind from preying upon itself. In order to make this argument, I
turn to what Mill referred to as the “anti-self-consciousness theory of Carlyle” in his *Autobiography* when he found something akin to Carlyle’s outward looking philosophy indispensable to his recovery from near mental breakdown (117). Carlyle himself never used the term anti-self-consciousness, but it is a useful phrase for signaling a recurrent theme in Carlyle’s work. In *Characteristics*, Carlyle identifies a morbid self-consciousness as the plague of modern Britain. He sneers at evidence of self-consciousness in almost all branches of society. (54). He makes clear his disapproval of self-conscious soul-searching, and what’s more, his prose constantly pronounces moral bankruptcy on those who fail to remedy their disease with self-control. It is not surprising, then, that in his *Autobiography* John Stuart Mill’s testimony to the effectiveness of Carlyle’s “anti-self-consciousness theory” (117) should not be a recommendation for further introspection but a tribute to the psychic benefit of changing one’s perspective and simply willing the self out of one’s consciousness.

This tendency towards morbid introspection—and the anti-self-conscious desire to somehow escape the self that indulges in it—is, I argue, everywhere to be found in Victorian fiction. To begin with a straightforward example, in *The Last Chronicle of Barset* by Anthony Trollope, the primary plot concerns Mr. Crawley, an impoverished clergyman wrongly accused of stealing a check. The question of his guilt consumes the entire novel. It also consumes Mr. Crawley. Before the truth comes out almost everyone, even Crawley’s adoring wife, believes Crawley must have stolen the money and, what’s more, must be mad. Indeed, more and more, Crawley believes this himself, and Trollope doesn’t leave us in any doubt as to what the problem is: “It was the fault of the man that he was imbued too strongly with self-consciousness” (644).

For a novel more squarely centered in the canon, take *Little Dorrit*. In this novel a middle-aged man, Arthur Clennam, falls in love with a much younger woman, Little Dorrit, who
happens also to have been born in a debtor’s prison, the Marshalsea. Clennam believes that he is somehow responsible for her father’s incarceration and worries himself with fictional scenarios of how this could be. But, when he succeeds in securing the Dorrits’ release (and makes them extraordinarily wealthy in the process), he replaces those worries with new ones about his unfitness for such rich friends. Then the entire city (including the Dorrits) lose their money in an investment scam, and Clennam alone decides he is at fault for being swindled. When the debt collectors come, Clennam’s problematic self-loathing and self-defeatism make him an easy target. He is carted off to the Marshalsea where he chooses to stay in the room that used to be Little Dorrit’s, ruminating on his failures.

*Bleak House* follows a similarly self-consuming logic. Richard Carstone, unable to apply himself to an occupation (and thus benefit from the salubrious mental effect of work), becomes monomaniacal about the inheritance case Jarndyce v. Jarndyce at the center of the novel. The problem, though, is not the case. Esther sees Richard “poring over a table covered with dusty bundles of papers which [seem] to [her] like dusty mirrors reflecting his own mind” (784). At once a metaphor and an agent, the case forces the mind inward, confusing it with the impossible questions raised by self-consciousness—what are my origins, what do I deserve, how I am connected to the people around me? The mind consumes itself just as the case consumes the very money that brought it into being.

Finally, take Caroline Helstone from Charlotte Bronte’s *Shirley*. Early in the novel Caroline breaks her heart over Robert Moore, a neighboring mill owner with other matrimonial aspirations. Caroline tries to keep her mind off her grief, but “these efforts brought her neither health of body nor continued peace of mind: with them all, she wasted . . . the heaviness of a broken spirit, and of pining and palsying faculties, settled slow on her buoyant youth. Winter
seemed conquering her spring: the mind’s soil and its treasures were freezing gradually to barren stagnation” (178). She almost dies as a result. At least some Victorians, it would seem, Victorians like Brontë, Dickens, and Trollope, feared that being “self-involved” constituted a perilously unstable state of being—one which, paradoxically enough, tended to destroy the self it interrogated. Somehow, through their plots, these novelists had to find a resolution.

By far the most important document in the history of Victorian anti-self-consciousness is to be found in the central three chapters of *Sartor Resartus* concerning Teufelsdröckh’s spiritual journey through The Everlasting No, The Center of Indifference, and The Everlasting Yea. By far the most popular section of the book (indeed these are the only pages cut in some extant nineteenth century copies), the three central chapters spoke with uncommon relevancy to readers’ personal experience. Already light on detail and only loosely connected to the rest of the book, this strangely impersonal, almost purely formal narrative of spiritual regeneration in only three steps recommended itself to excerption and repurposing. Readers were readily able to apply the narrative to a wide range of trials experienced in their own lives. As Leon Jackson explains:

> [R]eaders settled on these chapters and read them so affirmatively . . . because they offered a close, but transcendentalized, approximation of what Edmund Morgan has called the traditional Calvinist "morphology of conversion." Morgan defines a morphology of conversion as a "natural history of conversion . . . in which each stage could be distinguished from the next, so that a man could check his eternal condition by a set of temporal and recognizable signs." Readers of *Sartor* evidently used Carlyle's book in just this way, and were thus able to read their own spiritual anxieties and needs into Carlyle's structural account of the conversion process, as it moved from despair to regeneration. (160)

In effect, the three central chapters of *Sartor* provided a kind of secular guide for surviving self-consciousness.

In the chapters that follow I argue that Teufelsdröckh’s allegorical journey shares both its structure and its philosophical concern with many Victorian marriage plots which also chart their
hero or heroine’s journey from a state of morbid self-consciousness, through a rejection of self, on to an ecstatic affirmation of selfless love. In effect, the Everlasting Yea is transformed into the Everlasting I Do. Indeed, “the EVERLASTING YEA, wherein all contradiction is solved, wherein whoso walks and works, it is well with him” can be understood as any state of outward absorption, including religious devotion, steady employment, and pure love, which keeps the individual from falling into the “deep-seated chronic Disease,”. When it comes to Victorian novels, the state in which “all contradiction is solved,” both in terms of readerly and narrative desire is, of course, the state in which two become one, the ultimate consummation, the marriage.

The Victorians extracted the pure form of Sartor’s three central chapters and repurposed them for countless, specific, individual crises. They also repurposed them for countless, conventional marriage plots. This subset of Victorian novels rewrites Teufelsdröckh’s epic quest for outward-looking, selfless intimacy. Where he finds this intimacy in his relationship with God, in the Everlasting Yea, however, the marriage plot finds its selfless intimacy in romantic love, in the Everlasting I Do.

To revisit our novels in these terms we could say that Clennam’s incarceration in the Marshalsea locks him in to the Everlasting No. The Marshalsea’s walls may, unlike Teufelsdröckh’s, be visible, but they are equally “impenetrable . . . divid[ing] [him] from all living,” keeping his eyes only on himself. In a hysterical twist, Clennam’s push into the Center of Indifference comes at the hands of a Werther imitation, the young John Chivery, who magnanimously tells Clennam of Amy’s long-cherished love for the older man. The information hits Clennam “like a blow.” The narrator tells us: “Looking back upon his own poor story, [Amy] was its vanishing point. . . He had travelled thousands of miles towards it . . . it was the
centre of the interest of his life; it was the termination of everything that was good and pleasant in it; beyond there was nothing but more waste, and darkened sky” (767, emphasis mine).

Instead of the Center of Indifference, Clennam passes through the Center of Interest, but the effect is the same. He starts on that annihilation of self and at the crucial moment slips into unconsciousness, rousing himself only to find, not God, but “Little Dorrit, a living presence” (789). Saying their everlasting I do’s the couple go “quietly down into the roaring streets inseparable and blessed” (859). Focused solely upon each other they avoid becoming the “arrogant” or the “froward” or the “vain”—selfish, self-conscious individuals, who must “fret” and “chaff” and make their “usual uproar” (859-860).

In Bleak House (1853), Richard’s marriage fails to take his mind off the Jardyce case as his friends hoped, and so, his Everlasting Yea comes in death. However, the novel contrasts his trajectory with a successful Carlylean marriage. Many critics read Esther’s illness as a psychological identity crisis, the heroine emerging from her near death experience as a unified self. However, I would say her illness marks a Center of Indifference. Looking into the mirror when she awakes, Esther does not so much realize who she is but whom she has left behind. The psychological achievement is not that she has discovered a stable identity but that she no longer worries the question. No longer a reminder to herself of her own disorienting identity, Esther is finally able to let her “little body fall into the background” and devote herself, everlastingly, to Woodcourt. Caroline’s cure similarly involves a literal illness. Projecting her energy outward onto her mother/friend and husband, Caroline is able to give over ruminating and get well. In marrying Robert, Caroline annihilates her problematic sense of self without, like Werther, sacrificing her mortal body.
Crawley’s story varies from the others. One would be hard pressed to identify three stages in his prolonged agony of self-examination. And yet, the resolution of self-consciousness is clearly a Victorian one. Crawley demonstrates the will to survive. He climbs out of his suicidal abyss, laboring on until his name is restored. Notably, his freedom from self doubt and public infamy is the very condition on which his daughter will allow herself to marry her lover. The final pages show a changed Crawley solemnizing his child’s Everlasting I Do and settling back into restored domestic bliss with his own wife.

There are two important implications to re-reading the Victorian marriage plot as texts of anti-self-consciousness. First, when divorced from the generic expectations of the female bildungsroman, the marriage plot cannot be viewed as a failure or contradiction in terms, simply re-instating a domestic ideology of female self-sacrifice in lieu of promised self-realization. In their achievement of self-annihilation these heroines model, for both men and women, a distinctly Victorian resolution to morbid self-consciousness. If we are able to interpret Teufelsdrockh or Arthur Clennam as the modern man working out the intellectual and spiritual enigmas of his time, we must also recognize, in Caroline Helstone and Esther Summerson, the universal subject playing out the same philosophic question. Second, in reading the Victorian novel we, too, often attempt to escape self-consciousness. Focusing all our attention on beloved characters and plots, we, for a time, experience the kind of un-self-consciousness that anti-self-conscious desire is all about. Our readerly desire in picking up a novel thus often mirrors the romantic desire that urges that novel (and our reading experience) on to its necessary end.

The first chapter, “A Romance Re-Tailored: Sartor Resartus and the Love Letters of Jane and Thomas Carlyle,” lays the philosophical foundation for the anti-self-conscious marriage plot. Though structurally it bears no resemblance to any other novel in the Victorian period, Sartor
*Resartus* has often been identified as the first truly Victorian example of nineteenth-century fiction. The most popular section of the text consisted of what might best be called a parable explaining Carlyle’s “Theory of Anti-Self-Consciousness,” a concept that decried the paralyzing social and spiritual effects of placing a premium on self-examination in life and study and that romanticized a state of un-self-conscious being not feasible in the modern world. The first chapter traces the origins of this foundational text to the courtship and marriage of Thomas and Jane Carlyle. Reading *Sartor* and its earlier versions alongside the couple’s contemporaneous love-letters, the chapter demonstrates that the main character and central crisis of *Sartor* was originally modeled on romanticized versions of their own relationship. The love letters describe marriage as an un-self-conscious experience, in which the mind finds peace by becoming completely bound up in the other person.

Though Carlyle’s novel eventually substituted a mystic abstraction for the symbolic marriage, other Victorian writers seemed to have recognized, consciously or unconsciously, the affinity between Carlyle’s narrative of anti-self-consciousness and the marriage plot. These novelists chose to explore anti-self-conscious desire allegorically through romance. One such novelist was Elizabeth Gaskell. Famously, Gaskell began writing her first novel, *Mary Barton*, at the urging of her husband, who thought a steady, purposeful employment would help his wife cope with the loss of their young son. Gaskell was tormented by painful memories, and writing seemed to help. But when she sat down to busy herself with writing, she was following not only her husband’s advice, but Carlyle’s as well. In *Chartism* and *Past and Present*, Carlyle elaborated on his anti-self-consciousness theory, as delineated in *Sartor Resartus*, by adding a Gospel of Work, which Gaskell recommends to various friends in her letters. Following Carlyle, she counsels those beset with morbid introspection to “do the duty that lies nearest.” But in
following Carlyle’s advice, Gaskell discovered that his practical solution was deceptively simplistic. It worked well enough for Gaskell, who had only to pick up a pen, but for the working class characters in her novels, events outside their control often gave them no choice but to sit at home with nothing to do except think about their own steady starvation. Significantly, Gaskell does not offer a practical solution for the working poor, insisting instead on the role others play in helping or hindering our duty. She does, however, offer, as Carlyle did in *Sartor Resartus*, a vision of an anti-self-conscious utopia where we can not only identify the duty nearest at hand but perform it unhindered. Critics have long puzzled over *Mary Barton*’s two-plot structure, often complaining about the insufficiency of the marriage plot ending for what began as a political novel. However, such a position fails to recognize that the plots are intentionally at odds, one presenting the problem and the other offering, not a solution, but a visionary leap of faith. The ending of *Mary Barton* can, in a sense, never be reached, no more than anti-self-consciousness can ever be permanently obtained. The purpose of both is to direct our steps forward.

Charlotte Bronte wrote *Shirley* for the same reason Gaskell wrote *Mary Barton*, as a distraction from grief. By the time she was writing *Shirley*, Brontë’s own experience of loss and loneliness had made her dissatisfied with the self-denying romances that, through marriage, ascribed permanence to a necessarily unsustainable state of mind. Though *Shirley*’s hero and heroine escape at the end of the novel into an everlasting (and conveniently un-narrated) marriage, the reader’s escape is terminated the moment they do so. In *Villette*, however, Brontë creates a character whose experience of the marriage plot differs very little from that of the reader in that both experience all-consuming love only vicariously. Reader and heroine must come to terms with the impossibility of maintaining a pleasurable state of un-self-consciousness
outside the marriage plot. And yet, Brontë does not renounce marriage plots or self-escapism since the escape offered by reading, though transitory, can mitigate the pain of living out a solitary life. Brontë’s theory of anti-self-consciousness does not, like Carlyle’s, bid its adherents to strive for the end of self-consciousness; rather it counsels closure and repetition when the analgesic spell of a good novel or a fascinating love affair fades away.

I conclude Leave-takings with a brief consideration of the after-life of anti-self-conscious desire in the current debate in literary criticism over surface reading. The most prominent example of the recent backlash against the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” surface reading eschews traditional depth-based approaches to literary and cultural analysis in favor of more descriptive reading practices. Despite the stridency of the assertions, however, when compared to traditional reading practices, the published examples of surface reading demonstrate little methodological innovation. Reading several discussions of surface reading alongside George Eliot’s Romola, I draw a parallel between Romola’s disillusionment with her spiritual and political mentor and surface reading’s frustration with a previous generation of critics whose political promises remain unfulfilled. Eliot’s merciless dissection of both characters reminds us that, for her, sympathy was both an ethical mandate and a critical practice, a positive form of suspicion that re-orients, rather than repudiates, accepted interpretive methodologies. The comparison also reveals that literary criticism is not immune to anti-self-conscious desire—a longing it shares with Romola who, when beset with unanswerable questions, seeks to give up her responsibilities to Florence and “repose in mere sensation” (588).

In Sartor Resartus, Carlyle praises writers and thinkers capable of creating new symbols while lamenting society’s adherence to symbols that have grown old, conventional, or even false. The following chapters serve as flashpoints in the rise and fall of one symbolic narrative
structure: the Victorian marriage plot. Acknowledging the cultural and political value of the marriage plot’s escapist endings, *Leave-takings* re-appraises the intellectual contribution of these so-called domestic novels. Far from dismissing it as politically quietist or socially irresponsible, *Leave-takings* theorizes escapism as a vital tool in the political, social, and personal struggle against morbid self-consciousness.
Notes

1 Regenia Gagnier, in her richly historical *Subjectivities* (1991), considers alternative forms of subjective experience in autobiographies of the working class. Nevertheless, she makes this argument by opposing working-class narratives to canonical Victorian novels that created and fortified the bourgeois subject.

2 Page 35.

3 Page 229.

4 Of course, Moretti is also canny enough to realize that the classic *bildungsroman* is something of a mythic model, that, especially as the nineteenth century moves forward increasing anxiety over the reconcilability of individual and society torque the classic form of re-integration until, eventually, the form disappears altogether.
CHAPTER ONE:

A Romance Re-tailored:

_Sartor Resartus_ and the Love Letters of Jane and Thomas Carlyle

The self in thee needed to be annihilated. By benignant fever-paroxysms is Life rooting out the deep-seated chronic Disease, and triumphs over Death. On the roaring billows of Time, thou art not engulphed, but borne aloft into the azure of Eternity. Love not Pleasure; love God. This is the EVERLASTING YEA, wherein all contradiction is solved, wherein whoso walks and works, it is well with him.

—Thomas Carlyle, _Sartor Resartus_

Fools, fools; we forget that it has to end; lo this _has_ ended, and it is such an astonishment to me; so sternly undeniable, yet as it were incredible.

—Thomas Carlyle, _Reminiscences_

On April 21, 1866, Thomas Carlyle received a telegram informing him of his wife’s death. Jane Welsh Carlyle had been ill a long time but better in the past few weeks, and the news of her death came as a terrible shock to her husband. Without his partner of forty years, Carlyle felt lost and without purpose.¹ He weathered the next few weeks by writing down memories of his wife, beginning with the first time he saw her face:

I looked up at the windows of the old Room where I had first seen her,—1821 I believe, on a summer evening after sunset. . . ; she [was] the first thing I had to see there. The beautifullest young creature I had ever beheld; sparkling with grace and content, though sunk in sorrow (for loss of her Father), and speaking little. I noticed her once looking at me,—Oh Heaven, to think of that now!— (Reminiscences 193)

The younger man had himself been sunk in sorrow. Aged twenty-seven, Carlyle met Welsh while he was struggling to establish himself, working as a tutor to make ends meet. Moreover, he was ill in both body and mind, his debilitating stomach pains giving physical expression to his unremitting depression.² Welsh may have “sparkl[ed] with grace and content,” but in remembering her many years later, Carlyle also felt that her beauty came in part from a grief similar to his own. The older Carlyle remembers himself as already knowing what later experience would teach him—that a partner in life is also a partner in suffering.
Carlyle had described the same moment in a love letter he wrote to Welsh in 1822, not long after their introduction. In both descriptions Welsh appears other-worldly, but in this, the earlier letter, he expresses a hope that the heavenly Welsh’s redemptive influence can save him from his own unrelenting depression:

[T]he day when we first saw each other must be forever memorable. I as little think of classing it among the ordinary dates of my history, as I do of classing you among the ordinary mortals who have happened to become known to me. Such beings I had thought of, perhaps hoped to find; but it was long—very long ago. . . If I might paint to you how wasted and woe-begone I was—a prey to black inquietudes which had me sick of existence itself and reckless of aught good or evil that it had to offer me,—when I saw you, like an inhabitant of some more blessed sphere as I almost believed you, descend upon my desolate and dreary path which was fast going down, to the gates of Death,—and call me back to light, and life, and hopes more glorious than I had ever dared to form. (CLO, 18 Nov.)

Welsh, Carlyle dreams, is going to help him fight against his worst enemy—himself—and check his progress on the “desolate and dreary path” that he is “fast going down.” A life of self-pity, rumination, and solitude has created such a powerful sense of inadequacy that Carlyle is rendered incapable of fighting his way back to “to light, and life” without her as a motivating influence.

“Light,” however, would not be a defining feature of their future life together. Friends knew that all was not as it should be at Cheyne Row while both were still living, and shortly after Carlyle’s death, the rest of the world knew it, too. James Anthony Froude’s scandalous *Life of Carlyle* painted the Victorian sage as a domestic, even physically abusive, tyrant. In 1878, Frank Harris claimed to remember Carlyle admitting his impotence to him and later that Welsh Carlyle’s physician felt compelled to tell Harris that the woman had died a “virgo intacta” (Collis 180-82). With Carlyle’s character and manhood at stake, the first half-century of biographical work was largely devoted to condemning or exonerating its subject. When feminist scholars discovered that Welsh Carlyle was a brilliant writer in her own right, it soon became known that
Mrs. Carlyle’s genius had been meanly wasted by the demands of husband and housewifery. The scholarship only became more polemical—there could be only one good Carlyle.\textsuperscript{4} The peculiar critical legacy of the Carlyles has discouraged scholars from viewing the couple’s courtship and early marriage with sympathy for their dreams as well as for their naïveté.\textsuperscript{5}

*Reminiscences*, the widowed Carlyle’s posthumously published meditations on his wife and their married life together, certainly confirms a story of marital discord. In remembering his wife, Carlyle cannot seem to stop blaming himself for not loving her better, but at the same time, *Reminiscences* also reminds us that the marriage was long. Welsh Carlyle spent roughly two-thirds of her life and her husband almost half of his joined in holy matrimony. Though individual trips and vacations were not unusual, the two never separated or lived apart, despite the no doubt occasionally tempting example provided by several of their friends (Ashton, *Portrait* 155-58). As difficult as it was, the non-believing, independent-thinking Carlyles clearly valued their marriage either for what it was or what it had been, even perhaps, for what it might yet prove to be. As the tortured, disjointed *Reminiscences* makes evident, such a relationship could never fairly be judged as a complete success or failure.

In the weeks following his wife’s death, Carlyle struggled to come to terms with the fact that the two had not, as it were, been of one flesh, and that he must continue on alone. Often addressing his wife directly in his memorial to her, Carlyle seems to have been desperate to keep her with him in some form. At one moment he confidently declares that his wife will “accompany” him always and be his “guardian Genius . . . while [he] live[s],” but at the very next he pleads for mercy: “No, thou shalt not leave me; thou must not altogether!—” (*Reminiscences* 177). The writing itself keeps her near him. To “give up writing of her” would be “to fall silent towards her, and part with her, a second time” (177). When his wife dies,
Carlyle is again “a prey to black inquietudes,” as he was when he first saw her face, and despite the unhappy times that have passed since, he seeks relief in the same place he sought it before. He reaches out for Jane Baillie Welsh Carlyle and the “light, and life” (18 Nov 1822) she had represented for him in the past, only this time it comes from beyond the grave. Carlyle writes because, as he says, it provides him “daily companionship” (*Reminiscences* 108) with the woman he felt at times to be part of his very being. Though reliving the memories is “steeped . . . in pain” (*Reminiscences* 72), doing anything else only makes him “gloomier and sorer than ever” (*Reminiscences* 89). He keeps writing of his wife, because “nothing else yields . . . any solace at all” (*Reminiscences* 98).

In writing *Reminiscences*, Carlyle was trying, in a sense, to continue this imperfect, yet strangely vital, marriage. He clearly feared that after he took leave of her on paper as well as in body, there would be nothing standing between him and those “black inquietudes,” yet he must also have been aware of how temporary such a solution would be. He calls the practice “a kind of religious course of worship” (*Reminiscences* 107). The analogy reminds us how fundamental Welsh Carlyle was to her husband’s life experience; however, it also suggests how precarious was the couple’s mutual trust. Given as they were to critique and self-interrogation, the Carlyles were not people for whom maintaining authentic and unshakable belief could come easily. And yet, we need not be suspicious of Carlyle’s emotion in *Reminiscences* or any letter in which either partner waxed poetic about his or her love. It is when the Carlyles seem most in denial, when their continued commitment to one another seems the most foolhardy, that we see in striking relief the strength—not of their relationship—but of their romantic, selfless vision. Marriage for the Carlyles was a declaration of faith where they had none. To understand what this means we have only to think of reading a marriage plot. At least in the case of adult
readers—single, divorced, partnered, and married—accepting the defining promise of the genre that, no matter what happens in between, everything will work out in the end requires a willing suspension of disbelief, a willing dissociation of fictional and real marriages. In return for their mental effort, some readers have the experience of being vicariously loved. Others receive a reassuring reflection of their own normative values. All readers, however, are offered a far more precious return—one happy ending for which we may hope without fear. The Carlyles held believed in their marriage with all the stubbornness of a generic convention. If they just kept reading, writing, living, surely they would come to a happy ending at last. The Reminiscences continues this pattern of obstinate and irrational romantic faith.

The Carlyles’ experience of marriage, like Carlyle’s experience of writing it down, may have been “steeped in pain” (Reminiscences 72), but it also may have resembled writing the Reminiscences in this: that despite its frequent sorrows, marriage and the difficult faith it requires may have been the one thing that offered either of them “any solace at all” (Reminiscences 98), any hope in an already painful world. Samuel Butler famously quipped that “[i]t was very good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle marry one another, and so make only two people miserable and not four” (qtd. in Ashton, Portrait 10-11). There is probably more truth to the statement than Butler was aware, for the Carlyles bonded through misery. Being happy together presented challenges, but being together seemed to promise solutions, even if years of experience taught otherwise.

Early in his career, Carlyle identified his own psychological complaint—which he referred to as a “morbid self-consciousness” (Characteristics 42-43)—as the hallmark of his age.6 His essay Characteristics (1831) is devoted to the modern disease, and his first and only novel, Sartor Resartus (1833-1834), dramatized the struggle against self-consciousness in
Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh’s journey through the “Everlasting No,” the “Centre of Indifference,” and the “Everlasting Yea.” Today, we often use the word “self-consciousness” to mean an individual’s public experience of knowing or imagining the impression he or she makes on others. For Carlyle and his contemporaries, however, “self-consciousness” was generally used to describe the private experience of introspective self-assessment. What torments Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus* is not how he appears in the eyes of others—indeed he seems rather deficient in this area when compared to his exceptionally affected editor—but how his constant self-examination traps him in a self-perpetuating cycle of disappointment, despair, and general negativity, i.e., in the “Everlasting No.” Accordingly, the culmination of his journey in the “Everlasting Yea,” is imaginatively, even wishfully, described as a never-ending, faith-affirming state of un-self-consciousness. Barry V. Qualls has noted that Carlyle’s novel, as unusual as it may otherwise appear, participated in, if it did not invent, a tradition of secular romance shared by much Victorian fiction. The structural features of Christian allegory impart the comforting sense of possible salvation to narratives otherwise committed to presenting a “mundane life where few paradises are concretely realizable” (Qualls 13). But while the stamp of Christian allegory is clearly legible in Teufelsdröckh’s journey from the “Everlasting No” to the “Everlasting Yea,” this trajectory also bears the mark of a more domestic teleology. As Carlyle himself confessed, the idea for the “Everlasting No” came out of an experience he had during that same bout of depression during which he saw Welsh for the first time. But if his early melancholia inspired the beginning of a journey to an “Everlasting Yea,” it also, and more immediately, inspired a journey to the “Everlasting I Do”—the path from courtship to marriage.

Re-reading *Sartor* within the context of the hundreds of surviving letters written between Thomas and Jane Carlyle during their courtship, I argue that in this early correspondence, the
Carlyles find a place to work out both their doubts and desires. Together they begin to define a relationship, which later becomes marriage, that would enable them both to mystically realize an idealized, permanent state of un-self-consciousness, and in so doing, also lay the groundwork for the fantasy of an “Everlasting Yea” and the path one takes to get there. In both cases self-consciousness is the problem and letting go of that self is the first step. In Sartor, work and the divine come together to take Teufelsdröckh the rest of the way. In the romantic version love is all that is needed. What has come to be referred to as Carlyle’s anti-self-consciousness theory, I argue, had its origins in the morbid self-consciousness both he and Welsh suffered from and aspires to the same self-forgetfulness that both Carlyles desired from their marriage. Formally, the three chapters detailing Teufelsdröckh’s journey are a kind of symbolic, rarified marriage plot, and in appreciating it as such, we do more than simply situate the novel within the couple’s biography. Reading the novel as the product of a literary partnership allows us to recognize Welsh Carlyle’s contribution to the philosophy set forward in the text. It also offers a new interpretive perspective, one that differs from domestic analogy. Most importantly, perhaps, it refuses to separate metaphysical and domestic logic. Only by accepting this unconventional coupling can we hope to do justice to Carlyle’s text and to the many Victorian marriage plots that share its foundational structure.

1821-1823: The Marriage Plot Begins

The Carlyles’ relationship began in the early summer of 1821 when Jane Baillie Welsh’s former Latin tutor brought his friend and schoolfellow, Thomas Carlyle, to visit her and her mother at their home in Haddington. Carlyle wasted no time in making his feelings known. Mere days after their first meeting, he smuggled a brash declaration of love into the house concealed inside a
bundle of innocent-looking books that Welsh had requested for her studies. The unconventional (not to mention improper) missive dismayed and probably disgusted Welsh. The man who had hardly opened his mouth during the mundane social call now declares, “It seems as if we had known each other from infancy upwards,” and prophesies that he is “destined in process of time to know [her] far more intimately” (4 June 1821). He asks if she has “deigned to cast one glance of recollection on those few Elysian hours [they] spent together lately” while assuring her that he intends to love her regardless of her own feelings:

No doubt you may refuse me; you may even forbid me to repeat such questions. But it will be very cruel if you do: and even then there will be one inalienable comfort left me—the comfort that, no man woman or child can hinder me to cherish ‘within the secret cell of the heart,’ as long and as tenderly as I please, those sentiments of deep and affectionate interest, which I have thought meet to conceive towards you.

Welsh did not think it so “meet,” and after waiting some weeks, she returned the books with a brief message, misspelling his name: “To Mr. Carlisle, with Miss Welsh’s compliments and very best thanks” (27 June 1821). From her middle-class perspective, Welsh saw in Carlyle only a rude, unmannered rustic whose excellent education had proven incapable of correcting the rough brogue and clumsy manners that announced his peasant background. To put it mildly, Carlyle was an unlikely romantic hero and the cards were stacked against him. Winning the affection of the inimitable Jane Welsh would require a carefully orchestrated marriage plot.

A year into their correspondence, Carlyle was still getting nowhere with Welsh. She remained distant and barely confiding. In November of 1822, however, something changed. Welsh composed a letter to Carlyle unlike any he had received before, a letter about her father. John Welsh had died of scarlet fever when his only child, Jane, was eighteen. He had been the first to recognize her intellectual precocity and to encourage her scholarly pursuits, and his death came as a serious blow. She continued to think of him as the most perfect man she had ever
known. Thus, when Welsh compares Carlyle to her father, writing that Carlyle’s “eloquence awoke in [her] soul the slumbering admirations and ambitions that His [her father’s] first kindled there” (11 Nov. 1822), we can be sure her feelings for him have deepened.

Previously so flippant in her letters, Welsh now speaks with heart-wrenching honesty about her grief:

I was wretched beyond description: grief at the loss of the only being I ever loved with my whole soul, had weakened my body and mind; distraction of various kinds had relaxed my habits of industry; I had no counselor that could direct me, no friend that understood me; the pole-star of my life was lost and the world looked like a dreary blank. . . . I wept to think the mind he had cultivated with such anxious, un-remitting pains, was running to desolation . . . But in my studies I have neither the same pleasures, nor the same motives as formerly: I am alone . . . This solitude together with the distrust of my own talents, despair of ennobling my character, and the discouragement I meet with in devoting myself to a literary life, would I believe have oftener than once thrown me into a state of helpless despondency, had not your friendship restored me to myself by supplying (in so far as they can ever be supplied) the counsels and incitements I have lost.—You see I am not insensible to the value of your friendship, or likely to throw it away, tho’ you have sometimes charged me with inconstancy and caprice. (11 Nov. 1822)

The attempt at humor with which Welsh ends her paragraph is perhaps the best evidence of her sincerity. She values her correspondence with Carlyle for the sense of intimacy it creates and the opportunity to perform her despair and thus look at it from the outside even as she confronts it. In other words, writing to Carlyle allows Welsh to transform her overly-active private self-consciousness into something more akin to public self-consciousness.

When Welsh lost her father, she lost “the pole-star of [her] life” and “the world look[s] like a dreary blank.” As Freud would say of mourning, “the world . . . has become poor and empty” (246). However, Freud continues on to say that in melancholia, the world “is the ego itself” (246). For Welsh these two conditions, mourning and melancholia, cannot be meaningfully separated. In losing her “pole-star,” Welsh loses that magnetic pull which directs the self towards interests and pursuits in the outside world, and in the absence of this directing
force she is thrown entirely upon herself—“I am alone.” When the world no longer holds any interest, she turns inwards, but only to rediscover that impoverishment within herself. She finds “distrust of [her] own talents,” “despair of ennobling [her] character,” a lack of “pleasure” and “motive,” and a mind “running to desolation.” It is not so much that Welsh’s world has become her ego, but that the horizon of that world has become coterminous with the horizon of the self. World and self, in this sense, have become mutually impoverished.

It is this self-confinement that gives Welsh’s grief, however we term it, the miserable persistence of melancholia. A mind trying to escape self-consciousness is like a cat trying to catch its tail, a maddeningly circular activity that never succeeds for long, and continuing the activity reveals little more than the soul-crushing perception of one’s own narrowness. Though she admits to “distraction of various kinds,” what preoccupies Welsh (and the November 1822 letter) are her own limitations and deficiencies, her “weakened. . . body,” her “relaxed habits of industry,” her “despair at ennobling [her] character, and her literary “discouragement.” It is at this self-conscious impasse, of course, that Carlyle comes in. By creating a bond with Carlyle in the image of the one she shared with her father, Welsh finds what we might call a self-escape route. As Welsh writes to Carlyle, “your friendship restored me to myself by supplying . . . the counsels and incitements I have lost.” We might also say that it restored her to the world.

Allowing herself to feel an attraction towards Carlyle, Welsh succeeded in directing her broken compass north again and found something like the unquestioning self-confidence that she had experienced while her father was still alive. The question remains, however, why it took over a year of correspondence for Welsh to recognize this healing opportunity. The change of heart, I would suggest, came about in response to a twist Carlyle had put in his foundering marriage plot. After Welsh confides her belief that a “good Angel sent [Carlyle] hither” to ease her grief, she
excitedly gives her support to a project that Carlyle had proposed in his most recent letter, that they write an epistolary novel “in concert” (11 Nov.; 28 Oct. 1822) They would “make a new hero and heroine such as the world never saw” (28 Oct.), each writing for the character of their sex. “Could I have obtained your concurrence?” Carlyle asks in the letter, “Would to heaven we could make such a thing!” In her enthusiasm, Welsh writes that she “should like above all things” to participate and entreats him to begin the project immediately, urging, “Do let us set about it!” (11 Nov.) When Carlyle offers himself as a literary colleague, Welsh begins to see him as a possible partner, a partner whose encouragement and personal ambition could rekindle in her the sense of purpose extinguished by her father’s death.

In his novel proposal, Carlyle describes the projected work in some detail. Both the young Carlyle and the future Diogenes Teufelsdröckh are visible in the character sketch of the “hero” in his letter of October 28. He is to be a “noble mind struggling against an ignoble fate; some fiery yet benignant spirit reaching forth to catch the bright creations of his own fancy and breaking his head against vulgar obstacles of this lower world.” Welsh’s role is more enigmatic. After declaring that his limited imagination will allow him to “only draw the materials of [the hero] from [him]self,” Carlyle announces the greatest difficulty posed by this imaginative limit. Even if he may prove capable of capturing such a hero with his pen, the description of his love would certainly elude him, making it expedient that death cut such a representation short. “It were well he died of love,” writes Carlyle, for “your novel-love is become a perfect-drug; and of the genuine sort I could not undertake to say a word.” Carlyle needs help and “call[s] in [Welsh’s] assistance.” It is unfortunate, but at the same time fascinating, that the normally eloquent Carlyle (at least normally in his letters) becomes almost incoherent in the sentence on Welsh’s “novel-love,” the ambiguity of which is not alleviated by the fact that the interested
critic cannot tell from the manuscript whether the mark between those two words is a hyphen or a dash. Several interpretations are possible, but that “novel-love” functions as a compound noun contrasted to the structurally parallel “genuine sort [of love]” strikes me as the best possibility, both in sense and grammar. In this case, Carlyle contrasts genuine love with the fictional love found in the novel, i.e., the fatal, melodramatic kind, something a hero might actually die yearning for. The possessive pronoun “your” simply indicates that Welsh enjoyed novels and read them avidly whereas Carlyle did not. The routine, familiar plots of novel-love, we could then say, provide Carlyle with a kind of relief from trying to realize the exact nature of the relationship he hopes to have with Welsh. The familiar, conventional love of novels acts like the “perfect drug” because it allows him to fantasize about a passionate, romantic relationship with Welsh while momentarily forgetting how much more complicated the situation actually is. However, if the conventions of the novel gave Carlyle a simplified language for expressing his ardor, they also, by the same token, seemed to cheapen the genuine article. He could not find the words for a genuine love, a love where a heroine and a hero “such as the world had never seen”—such as a future Jane and Thomas Carlyle—could be happy. He could imagine his alter ego dying for love easily enough, perhaps even getting married, but living happily ever after was another story. Perhaps if they put their heads together, their hearts would tell the rest.

No matter how we read the sentence, one thing is clear; Carlyle believed (or a more cynical critic than I might say that Carlyle wanted Welsh to believe) not only that she inspired the novel but that, with such a heroine, the novel simply could not be written without her. Welsh took the bait, and the proposed novel consumes the correspondence for the next several weeks. After reading a short story Carlyle shared with her, perhaps as a sample of his wares, Welsh expresses her excitement and her insecurities with characteristic wit and biting humor:
Oh, this book! This book! I dream on it all day and wake on it all night. You and it together will assuredly drive me mad (One of my great-grandaunts—she had been taught Latin too—died in a strait-waistcoat). Write Tales, indeed, to be placed side by side with yours! . . . for you cannot but know that were I to rack my heart and soul, I should never be able to extort anything worthy of being mentioned in the same century with the Story you have sent me. Unmerciful that you are, thus to throw me back on my own weakness after deluding me with the hope of getting my stupidities enlightened by your wit and genius. I cannot even commence. . . . For mercy’s sake help me in; if you do not, you shall hear some morning that I have hanged myself in my garters for an ambitious ass. (24 Dec. 1822)

Fortunately, Welsh never hanged herself with her garters, at least not literally. If the novel produced a sort of madness in Welsh, it was a lunacy of blind passion and vague ambition. In her enthusiasm, she conflates the novel with her co-author, combining the real and imagined romances into one fantastic future of endless possibility. Most importantly, however, both Carlyle and Welsh rest the foundation of their faith on each other. Where Carlyle agonizes over capturing the perfections of his heroine without her, Welsh despairs of ever getting “in” the novel without him.

The two never completed their novel, and none of the abortive efforts they mention in the letters survive. Nevertheless, the ill-fated novel may have—at least partially—served its intended purpose. It seems reasonable to conjecture that Carlyle’s object in suggesting the co-authored novel was two-fold. In the first place, he attempted to bolster his own feeble will by enlisting another’s. Perhaps splitting the necessary labor would also divide the accompanying anxiety and thus make writing a masterpiece simultaneously less painful and more realistic. In this regard, he must have been disappointed. But Carlyle must have had another object in mind as well. Welsh was likely to encourage Carlyle in any literary endeavor he might undertake. What he proposed, however, was quite specific—a collaborative epistolary novel composed of letters between lovers. In other words, he proposes that they re-tailor a project they had already begun. By enlisting Welsh to re-write their platonic correspondence as part of a carefully plotted romance
novel, Carlyle essentially asked her to redefine the genre of their relationship as well. Imposing
the conventions of novel-love upon his real (or perhaps not real enough) love-affair, Carlyle
directed Welsh’s romantic ambivalence into the well-worn grooves of the marriage plot. We
might say that they fell in love over the promise of fiction. The marriage plot, impractical and
misguided as it may be, takes its generic stand on hopefulness and futurity. In every new
iteration, it declares its faith in everlasting happiness. Vowing to write a romance novel for their
star-crossed avatars, Welsh and Carlyle couldn’t have helped thinking about their own future
chances at happiness. When the couple left off writing, they refused to admit defeat. On
Christmas day of 1822, Carlyle promises, “[we shall] write together when times are better . . .
and we shall write in concert—if Fortune does not mean to vex me more than she has ever done,”
concluding, “Hope is a fine creature after all! I owe her more than the whole posse of Saints and
Angels put together.” By refusing to accept literary failure, Carlyle and Welsh similarly denied
the possibility that their own romance might not end any better. Allowing “novel-love” to narrate
the success of their own genuine affection, the promise of “happily ever after” seeped quietly
through their literary imaginations and into their personal dreams.

Theorizing the Ends of Marriage 1823-1826

There is a certain literary theoretical fitness in two nineteenth-century lovers endeavoring to
break through the isolating impulse of private self-consciousness by writing a novel in tandem.
According to Georg Lukács, the very structure of the novel attempts to resolve the problematic
experience of modern self-consciousness illustrated so well by Welsh and Carlyle’s
personalities—the unbridgeable, often painful gap between subject and object, self and other.
During their courtship, Welsh and Carlyle eagerly read and exchanged their ideas on German
Romanticism, the same literary movement that, according to Lukács, formed the basis of his theory (41). For Lukács, literary forms come into being to answer the psychological needs of a society. Literature takes the form of ideology and through this form creates myths that attempt to smooth over the rifts inherent in any totalizing structure—to create a sense of totality in an incomprehensible world. In the nineteenth-century, advances in science, the Industrial Revolution, and a decline in religious belief, along with a host of other social variables, came together to form what is often accepted as a peculiarly modern subjectivity that Lukács imagines as being doubly alienated. Not only do subjects in such a society perceive themselves to be alienated (or severed) from the world outside themselves, they also no longer have a foundation on which to ground their belief in the nature of that world. The subject feels separated from a totality he or she no longer even has faith in. To be aware that there is no necessary relationship between subjective and objective reality is to become a “problematic individual” in a “contingent world” (78). In other words, the existence of an objective world is contingent upon the fact of subjective recognition, and the existence of the subject is dependent on the existence of an objective world. Because everything is contingent on everything else, there is no ground, no home for the certainty of belief. Lukács refers to this maddening, circular state of self-consciousness as “transcendental homelessness” (60). The novel, he writes, “seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life” (60). By taking the “form” of the bildungsroman, the nineteenth-century novel seeks to answer the self-conscious questions, who am I? and where do I belong? (60) Together, Welsh and Carlyle sought to escape their self-conscious awareness of contingent selfhood and to avoid the disturbing and unanswerable questions necessarily raised by this mental condition. Their proposed novel, itself a
bildungsroman, appears to have set out to serve the very function Lukács would have expected it to have.

Even though the novel was abandoned, the couple continued to rely upon a romantic discourse derived from the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century novel, adapting it to their own needs at the same time they used it to shape their romance. Welsh and Carlyle made especially frequent use of romantic expressions inflected with Christian iconography, in particular the trope of two becoming one (either with a lover, God, or more metaphysically, both). The problem this particular concept poses to women has, of course, been a concern common among feminists, and literary critics have shown what a powerful influence such rhetoric has had on the history of the novel. For Lukács, the marriage plot tyrannizes over the nineteenth-century novel precisely because the institution simultaneously solidifies social structures and spiritual belief through the symbolic unity of husband and wife. The fact that the male protagonist often appears to subsume the identity of his female counterpart rather than merge seamlessly with her, reinforces women’s secondary status in society through what has become the familiar death-in-marriage paradox (Miller ix-xii; DuPlessis 1-19). Depending on whether or not she maintains her virtue, a woman at the end of the novel either marries or dies a real or social death. Either way, as far as being a subject (figuratively or legally) is concerned, she might as well be dead.

In the Carlyles’ love letters, however, where the union of two morbidly self-conscious souls promises a much desired self-loss or escape for both parties, the same figurations take on a greatly more nuanced meaning, suggesting that even this most problematic of generic conventions may have at least had the potential to be a far more complicated and more equivocally gendered narrative device. Though Carlyle’s statement that “properly you are part of
me, are I,” may sound like the voice of patriarchal possession, Carlyle uses this personal, romantic discourse to comment on a condition he perceives to be universal to his historical moment (14 Sept. 1831). It is precisely by choosing romance as the place for such philosophical reflection that Carlyle actually succeeds, where Lukács does not, in making his observations gender-neutral:

How wild are our wishes, how frantic our schemes of happiness when we first enter on the world! Our hearts encircled in the delusions of vanity and self-love, we think the universe was made for us alone; we glory in the strength of our gifts, in the pride of our place; and forget that the fairest ornament of our being is ‘the quality of mercy,’ the still, meek humble Love that dwells in the inmost shrine of our nature, and cannot come to light till Selfishness in all its cunning forms is banished out of us, till affliction and neglect and disappointment have sternly taught us that Self is a foundation of sand, that we, even the mighty we, are a poor and feeble and most unimportant fraction in the general sum of Existence. . . Let us be wise, let us admit this painful but medicinal conviction, and meekly learn the lesson which it teaches us. O Jane! Why should we murmur? Are we not rich in better things than silver or gold, or the vain babble of stupid men? We have found each other, and our hearts are one, our beings are one; for we love each other with a love not grounded on deception but on truth, and no force can part us, or rob us of that blessing! Heavenly affection! Heavenly trust of soul to soul! This can soften all afflictions, if it is genuine and lasting as it is in noble hearts. (10 Aug. 1825)

With the exception of “stupid men,” Carlyle succeeds in writing this rather verbose disquisition on the human condition without resorting to the generic masculine. His subject, the unified lovers “we” or “us,” remains gender neutral. In fact, there may be a sense in which “stupid men” are stupid precisely because of their gendered (and thus necessarily partial) humanity. Of course, such thoughtfulness is by no means typical of Carlyle’s treatment of gender, but that is, in a way, precisely the point. It is when Carlyle writes romantically, in the very discourse so often faulted for the subordination of women, that he finds a means, by re-tailoring the conventions to his own purposes, to be so inclusive. The frequent blending of Christian and romantic ideology allows him to trade upon the “still, meek humble Love” in order to deify his love into a “Heavenly affection.” Neither Welsh nor Carlyle is a believer, but the conventional use of the discourse of
divine love for terrestrial purposes enables Carlyle to endow lines like “our hearts are one, our beings are one . . . one has no hope but in the other, no care but for the other” with the very absolutism that made a career in the church impossible for him. Though Carlyle describes the transformation as a personal one, completed in the span of a lifetime, his narrative maps nicely onto the ideological transformation detailed by Lukács and posited as the underlying reason for the rise of the novel. In coming together, the pair of lovers (“we”) not only gain access to the totality of the “universe,” but discover that it is “made for us alone.” It is only when “Selfishness in all its cunning forms is banished out of us” and self-consciousness completely eluded that the true relation between the “fraction” and “general sum” can be grasped, if not fully realized.

Carlyle, like Lukács, perceives that to the modern sensibility the “Self is a foundation of sand” on which no external absolute, no home, can be built. His use of conventional romantic discourse, however, provides his system of belief with the form, if not the substance, of totality. If he and Welsh have found a “love not grounded on deception but on truth,” of which “no force” internal or external can “rob” them, then their love alone establishes a truth unassailable by self-doubt. In finding love, one must first “banish” the self and have “no hope but in the other, no care but for the other.” Restricting one’s hopes and cares to the well-being of the beloved rather than of the self is the only way to “front . . . the squalid repulsiveness of the actual world,” and the vortex of self-consciousness that makes intervention seem impossible (10 Aug. 1825). Love is a necessary and beautiful survival strategy.

Crucially, Welsh also finds in the conventional language of romantic fusion a useful vocabulary for exploring psychological states of being that the most technical idioms of science and philosophy have struggled to articulate:

My best Friend! be assured you can never be forgotten while I recollect myself—Your idea is so identified with all my projects and pursuits that it can only be effaced when I
have ceased to feel or when my being has undergone a change even worse than
annihilation—Oh no—we shall never forget each other—our friendship is no paltry
intimacy, contrived in the interest of idleness—I am persuaded that it was planned by
Mother Nature before we saw the light, and founded on a surer basis than fortune or
Caprice—There is no doubt of it—“we shall be friends for ever”—This assurance
comforts me when I have need of consolation. (6 June 1823)

Welsh maintains that she cannot dissociate her identity from that of her lover—the two have
become one. Strangely, however, it is Carlyle’s identity and not Welsh’s that is, at first,
presented as at risk and in need of reassurance. Welsh promises Carlyle that he will “never be
forgotten” and will not “be effaced.” Though her “I” is occupied with remembering him, it is not
given up for his benefit. Though her projects and pursuits are identified with Carlyle, they are
still her own. As the letter continues, Welsh begins to make strong statements about the nature of
“our friendship,” with authority based both in persuasive argumentation and simple self-assertion.
Indeed, as she describes for Carlyle how she understands the nature of their intimacy, Welsh
draws on the language of romantic desire to delineate subtle but substantial distinctions between
the various meanings of self-loss and escapism. For Welsh, the situation is something akin to
what Lukács says of Leo Tolstoy’s work, that “the fact of being married, of becoming one, [is]
more important than who it is that is thus united” (148). Welsh privileges her union with Carlyle
over herself, insisting that the former will not be “effaced” even if her being undergoes
“annihilation.” The self-loss that occurs when two individuals become irrevocably joined—
spiritually, socially, and practically—appeals to her deeply. To be clear, however, Welsh also
makes sure to contrast this romantic self-loss with two less palatable versions. First, there is
death. However, “Even worse than annihilation” in death is yet another kind of self-loss in which
she would have “ceased to feel.” Defined, as this condition is, against both romantic self-loss and
ceasing to live, we can assume that ceasing to feel indicates a kind of anaesthetization or death in
life to which the lonely heart is peculiarly susceptible. Norma Clarke misses these distinctions

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when she argues that Welsh was repulsed by “the erotic” because it was, for her, “associated with marriage . . . [and] identified with loss of the unique self” (“Wonderful” 225). Biased by the positive connotations that we, in the twentieth century, hear in a phrase like “unique self,” such as independence, equality, and self-knowledge, we, like Clarke, tend to assume that if Welsh perceived marriage as self-loss she must have viewed the institution negatively. As we have seen, however, self-loss can mean something entirely different from subservience and a low self-esteem. A selfless marriage can also mean one in which both parties escape from self-questioning and irresolution by transforming the very terms of their existence. Welsh does not want to subsume herself in Carlyle in order to serve him but in order to escape a lonely, unproductive, and even self-destructive habit of being. For her, “the erotic, associated with marriage,” is indeed, “identified with loss of the unique self,” but with a self-loss of the most consoling kind.

To better understand what Welsh means when she writes that her “being” would have to be subjected to “a change even worse than annihilation” before she could separate it out from the idea of Carlyle’s, we might consider Catherine’s confession to Nelly in Wuthering Heights, “If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger” (Brontë 82). In other words, to channel Lukács, if Heathcliff were annihilated, Catherine would become doubly alienated and “transcendentally homeless.” Though Wuthering Heights departs from the traditional structure of the marriage plot, it resembles these fictions in so far as it equates romantic consummation with metaphysical totality. In identifying Carlyle as her escape route, Welsh does no more than the many fictional heroines who find their escape, the “end” of their journey, in getting married and establishing a home. However, as a “heroine such as the world never saw” (i.e., a heroine of real
life), Welsh struggles to trust in a merely symbolic resolution to her phenomenological housing problems. After all, the difficulty of being doubly alienated is unreliability and contingency. Welsh, therefore, “against [her] own wisdom, which has been forced to see the uselessness of the struggle,” tries to “turn [her] faith into a reality,” tries to “be persuaded that [the intimacy] was planned by Mother Nature” and is “founded on a surer basis than fortune or caprice” (Lukács 85; CLO, 6 June 1823).

1823-1826: Imagining Marriage as Everlasting Ending

Carlyle and Welsh remained confident that love was the solution to morbid self-consciousness and the writer’s block it often induced. When tentative plans are made to visit London, Welsh expects “to lead, for three months, the happiest, happiest life that [her] imagination hath ever conceived” because it will enable the lovers to be “together in [their] occupations, together in [their] amusements, always together!” (14 Oct. 1823). Carlyle expresses a similar, if more melodramatic, sentiment when he turns to Welsh, after accusing himself of being “very idle” and only “growing more and more stupid every day,” to lament that “[s]carce any thing can rouse [him], and every thing went to wreck when [he] cease[d] exertion” (18 Feb. 1823). If either his inspiration or self-discipline occurred to him as likely culprits, he doesn’t say so, choosing to look for an explanation external to himself: “I wish you were beside me constantly,” he writes, “under your auspices I feel as if it were a crime to let sickness or any other cause keep me one moment from my speed.” He cannot be “grateful enough for the pleasure which [Welsh has] both the power and the will to diffuse over even the most desolate portions of existence” and gives an example of how recently she has come to his aid in this manner:

I have often thought of Sunday night, and wondered what it was that pleased me so in it. We said nothing worth remembering, the scene was simple, our employments still
Carlyle’s French source has not been traced, and *The Carlyle Letters Online* translates the phrase straightforwardly as “The greatest of pleasures is to abandon the self,” but an earlier gloss on the phrase, “to lose self-consciousness is the greatest of pleasures,” is probably closer to Carlyle’s meaning (A. Carlyle 166). What Carlyle valued in his time with Welsh was not the feeling of self-abandonment (an expression that can connote *more* rather than *less* self indulgence) but rather un-self-consciousness, an assertion further supported by an earlier letter Carlyle wrote to a friend, Robert Mitchell, using the exact phrase. Observing that abandoning the self is the greatest of pleasures, Carlyle wrote “in order to enjoy [the greatest pleasure] however imperfectly,” seeking to “relieve [his] solitude by an emblem of society, since [he could not] get the real article to [his] mind” (4 Apr. 1821). The sentiment recalls the pleasure both Welsh and Carlyle experienced writing and reading epistolary emblems of each other’s society. In particular, Carlyle here contrasts the experience of writing letters to the experience of reading Christopher North of the ‘Monthly’ and “a host of other *Ecrivassiers* [scribblers].” Absent interlocutors of this sort only “confus[e] [him] with their incessant & unmusical hubbub—driving all old thoughts away, and putting no new one in their room.” To borrow this language, we might say that Welsh not only drove old thoughts away but also replaced them with new (and more pleasant) ones. Her engrossing conversation and unshakable faith in Carlyle’s ability distracted him from the debilitating self-consciousness that normally attended all his literary and scholarly endeavors. Carlyle and Welsh believed that love was one way to escape the self and achieve the un-self-consciousness necessary for intellectual labor untrammeled by doubt. Welsh and Carlyle
understood the “ends” of love to mean self-escape and literary greatness. Un-self-consciousness consummates love in a literal marriage of minds.

**Carlyle’s Theory of Anti-self-consciousness**

Carlyle himself never used the term “anti-self-consciousness.” It was coined by John Stuart Mill, who briefly refers to “Carlyle’s theory of anti-self-consciousness” (117) in his *Autobiography*. It is frustratingly difficult to parse the word. It sounds like an attitude more than anything, but it has become the norm in literary criticism to speak of it as though it were an inhabitable state. Geoffrey Hartman revived the term in Romantic criticism in an effort to rethink the Romantic relationship between human consciousness and the natural world and correct what he saw as a troublesome tendency to theorize Romanticism in terms of transcendence. According to Hartman, the Romantics sought an antidote to self-consciousness that would not “escape from or limit knowledge” but rather would “convert [self-consciousness] into an energy finer than the intellectual” (180-90, 181). To put it more concretely, the Romantic artist puts his thoughts on paper in order to set them loose from the confines of the mind and re-introduce them to the physical world. For Hartman, the Romantics turned to art in order to locate a non-transcendent sense of soul or self in the space between the physical and the intellectual, the objective world and the subjective imagination (180-90). By using the phrase anti-self-consciousness, the Romantics, according to Hartman, engaged in a “dialectical movement of soul-making” that took place both within and without self-conscious thought (181).14

Whether or not this is an accurate description of Romanticism, it does not seem like an accurate description of Carlyle’s theory. Hartman quite simply (and perhaps intentionally) misreads Carlyle in order to find a term for a distinctly Romantic concept of artistic achievement.
Mill clearly understood the practice of the “anti-self-consciousness theory of Carlyle” not as a recommendation for further introspection but as a tribute to the psychic benefit of changing one’s perspective and willing the self—by means of distraction—out of one’s consciousness. In following out the theory, Mill reconceived happiness as something that “was only to be attained by not making it the direct end” (117):

Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way. (117)

They do not, I would add, discover themselves in a “dialectical movement of soul-making.” Mill, in fact, is not interested in self-making at all. He simply wants to be happy, and the best way to do that is to implement a regimen of systematic distraction. By focusing on something outside the self, Mill hoped that he might forget his mental crisis long enough to get out of it.

Though Mill does not say what work of Carlyle’s contains this life philosophy, it is safe to assume that he is remembering Carlyle’s treatment of self-consciousness in Characteristics (1831), Sartor Resartus (1832-33), and personal conversation. Carlyle’s thoughts on the matter are much more complex than Mill’s. They are also detached from any aspiration to happiness, an emotion he rarely had much need for. In Characteristics, self-consciousness is a distinctly destructive force that like all “metaphysical speculation, begins in No or Nothingness,” and thus “must needs end in nothingness; circulate and must circulate in endless vortices; creating, swallowing—itself” (58). Self-consciousness is simultaneously self-perpetuating and self-consuming. It is also, unfortunately, the defining condition of the century, at least as Carlyle sees it. “Never since the beginning of time,” he writes, “was there, that we hear or read of, so intensely self-conscious a society” (42). To some degree, such a statement seems to imply a Panglossian best-of-all-possible worlds where anti-self-consciousness would reign supreme, but
elsewhere in the essay Carlyle presents this “possible world” as more of an impossible one. The problem, of course, is that maintaining anti-self-consciousness for any period of time is necessarily impossible. To this problem, Carlyle proposes a rather paradoxical answer. The cure for self-consciousness, as it turns out, is self-consciousness. The bulk of the essay, however, often works to contradict this claim. Carlyle continually condemns the self-consciousness he sees everywhere around him, charging almost all branches of society with a morally bankrupt self-indulgence. The message comes through loud and clear—self-consciousness is to be avoided at all costs. When, for instance, Carlyle writes that Romantic literature, “like a sick thing, superabundantly ‘listen[s] to itself” (54), he does not suggest that they listen even harder. The homeopathic treatment recommended earlier in the text has been entirely forgotten. Nevertheless, anti-self-consciousness is typically understood in the criticism as functioning in this paradoxical manner.  

When trying to unravel Carlylean anti-self-consciousness, it is crucial that we pay close attention to the metaphor of disease that runs throughout Characteristics. The disease model allows Carlyle to think of self-consciousness and its undoing as a continual process of recuperation and relapse in which the threat of the disease brings out the unlooked for power to fight it. Self-consciousness in Carlyle’s writing can, in fact, be best understood as a terminal illness. Its victim conquers by never surrendering in the face of inevitable defeat. Carlyle’s later seduction by totalitarianism and the conviction that “might is right” find their origins here, but we should not lose sight of how Carlyle’s exhausting psychological theory elucidates his early writings. Thinking of the mind as a patient always on the verge of crisis, teetering between self-consciousness and anti-self-consciousness, and fighting for every scrap of mental control, encourages us to do so within a larger narrative, one that might be called the life of the mind.
The moral urgency of attending to one’s state of conscious awareness comes from its role within a teleological narrative of either victory or defeat. By both situating anti-self-consciousness in time and positing (via analogy) an escape from temporal being, Carlyle manages to have it both ways. However, Carlyle’s medical metaphors cannot be pressed too deeply, and he always felt that the essay came up short. The problem, of course, is that the disease is always a terminal one. Death, the only permanent kind of anti-self-consciousness, inheres within the very definition of anti-self-conscious health. Carlyle needed something more pliable than this narrative of disease. He needed something akin to the imaginative (and often imaginary) ideological resolutions of novels. Enter *Sartor Resartus*.

**1826-1831: Writing Beyond the Marriage: *Sartor Resartus***

The Carlyles were married on October 17th, 1826, and from that date, Carlyle’s journal remains silent until December 3rd: “Comely Bank. Married! Married!—Aber still davon! [But of that no words]—and of a thousand other things. I am for business” (Qtd. In Kaplan 121). If it seems odd that the newlywed Carlyle should move so quickly from love to labor, we should remember that both Welsh and Carlyle thought that married life would enable precisely that—work. Once they were joined together in holy matrimony, they expected that writing would be disencumbered from the morbid self-consciousness and self-doubt that had all but paralyzed them before. It should be no surprise, then, that part of that business included returning to the postponed novel. It is as if Carlyle thought that writing the union of their “genuine” love would be easier now that it had, legally at least, been actualized. “Wotton Reinfred” (1827), the fragment he wrote a year into their marriage, resembles the plot sketched out for the earlier proposed novel in that both pieces foreshadow Teufelsdröckh’s strange *bildungsroman* in *Sartor Resartus*. From the
beginning of *Sartor* we anticipate the moment when Wotton will finally re-connect with the woman he loves above all others, the woman whose absence has sent him into the depths of despair and whose reappearance seems guaranteed to renew his faith in life. However, two hundred pages in, when this woman (whose name, incidentally, is Jane) finally appears, the fragment breaks off. Carlyle still found it impossible to write the love story “wherein all contradiction is solved” (146). Perhaps tasting married life made the task even more difficult. Marriage was not in fact an *end* to anything, self-consciousness included. Though the Carlyles might have occasionally found self-escape in each other’s company, it was no more permanent than it had been before. The self always returned, and the arduous process of self-annihilation had to begin anew. Nevertheless, Carlyle felt called upon to write the narrative of anti-self-consciousness even after the marriage plot proved incapable of structuring the journey to his satisfaction. In *Sartor Resartus*, he retailed his anti-self-conscious courtship plot as a metaphysical pilgrimage.

From its first iterations, *Sartor* leaned heavily on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Both works follow their hero through an existential crisis. When Werther recognizes the prison house of his own mind, he gives up in desperation, crying out, “Does [man] not lack the very powers he has most need of? And if he should soar in joy . . . is he not halted and returned to his cold, dull consciousness at the very moment he was longing to be lost in the vastness of infinity?” (105) Werther insists on the limitations of his own conscious being by posing a question that he cannot possibly answer. Like Werther, Teufelsdröckh’s troubles start with a woman, but, unlike Jane Carlyle and Werther’s beloved Lotte, Blumine is shallow and unworthy, a femme fatale who leaves him staring into the abyss of his own empty
soul. Teufelsdröckh’s misery has, nevertheless, all the Romantic markers of Werther’s mortal funk:

I seemed to have nothing given me but eyes, whereby to discern my own wretchedness. Invisible yet impenetrable walls, as of Enchantment, divided me from all living: was there, in the whole wide world, any true bosom I could press trustfully to mine? O Heaven, No, there was none! . . . Now when I look back, it was a strange isolation I then lived in. The men and women around me, even speaking to me, were but Figures; I had, practically, forgotten that they were alive, that they were not merely automatic. In the midst of their crowded streets, and assemblages, I walked solitary; and (except as it was my own heart, not another’s, that I kept devouring) savage also, as the tiger in the jungle. (Sartor 126-27).

Teufelsdröckh, “like a sick thing, superabundantly ‘listen[s] to [him]self’” (Characteristics 54), but unlike Werther, he refuses to give up so easily. Equipped with all the self-control and willpower of a true Victorian, the German professor absolutely refuses to be denied infinity, and instead of asking questions, he hears voices. He moves through the three stages of spiritual conversion by means of a dialogue with mysterious otherworldly interlocutors in a format that attests both to Sartor’s epistolary origins and to Carlyle’s faith in the possibility of escaping the self.

Accordingly, Teufelsdröckh begins his movement out of the Everlasting No by conversing with it. The Everlasting No says, “‘Behold, thou art fatherless, outcast, and the Universe is mine (the Devil’s),’” and, Teufelsdröckh answers back, “‘I am not thine, but Free, and for ever hate thee!’” (Sartor 129). With these fighting words, significantly addressed to something outside his own being, Teufelsdröckh vanquishes the Everlasting No and passes into the Center of Indifference:

[C]ast, doubtless, by benignant upper Influence, into a healing sleep, the heavy dreams rolled gradually away, and I awoke to a new Heaven and a new Earth. The first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self (Selbst-tödtung), had been happily accomplished; and my mind’s eyes were now unsealed, and its hands ungyved. (142)
In the Everlasting No, Teufelsdröckh is so self-conscious that he cannot register the existence of those outside himself. In the Center of Indifference, he loses all consciousness whatsoever and falls asleep. In this sleepy state, the “preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self” (142), is accomplished. Unable before to see anything but himself, Teufelsdröckh’s eyes are now “unsealed” (142), opened to the presence of the world outside his own mind. Acts of self-abnegation and ascetic humiliation are nowhere to be found. Rather, self-annihilation consists of letting go of the perverse desire for self-torment and focusing on the outside world.

The Center of Indifference, however, is not the goal, but a center—a transition between two everlasting infinities, itself out of time and unavailable to lived reality. If Teufelsdröckh is to remain unconscious of himself, something else, something permanent, must take its place and guard against the self’s re-entrance into self-conscious existence. Carlyle’s solution is to have Teufelsdröckh trade self for God and a life of active work. His mind overflows with religious fervor and faithful affirmation:

> The self in thee needed to be annihilated. By benignant fever-paroxysms is Life rooting out the deep-seated chronic Disease, and triumphs over Death. On the roaring billows of Time, thou art not engulfed, but borne aloft into the azure of Eternity. Love not Pleasure; love God. This is the EVERLASTING YE'A, wherein all contradiction is solved, wherein whoso walks and works, it is well with him. (146)

Once the self has been annihilated, and the daring passage through the Everlasting No and the Center of Indifference has cured the “chronic Disease” of self-consciousness, then the individual must devote him or herself to a continual loving faith and secure that faith by working. Even after the self has been annihilated, thought is not altogether safe and must defend against the doubt and self-examination that would threaten to resurrect the annihilated self.

Steady employment is the only way an individual can maintain the conviction of the Everlasting Yea:
Conviction, were it never so excellent, is worthless till it convert itself to Conduct. Nay properly Conviction is not possible till then; inasmuch as all Speculation is by its nature endless, formless, a vortex amid vortices: only, by a felt indubitable certainty of Experience, does it find any centre to revolve around, and so fashion itself into a system. Most true is it, as a wise man teaches us, that ‘Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by Action.’ On which ground too let him who gropes painfully in darkness or uncertain light, and prays vehemently that dawn may ripen into day, lay this other precept well to heart, which to me was the invaluable service: ‘Do the Duty which lies nearest thee,’ which thou knowest to be a Duty! Thy second Duty will already have become clearer. (148)

Carlyle’s definition of work is extremely broad, encompassing the various physical, emotional, and mental actions that are necessary for fulfilling whatever obligation or calling lies closest to hand. Writing and marriage are both kinds of work. Indeed, the Everlasting Yea is essentially nothing more than an abstraction of the Carlyles’ fantasy of married life (i.e., the Everlasting I Do). The emphasis Carlyle places on the work required both to reach and to maintain the Everlasting Yea also testifies to what the first few years of married life had taught the Carlyles. Insofar as the Everlasting Yea functions as the culmination of Teufelsdröckh’s journey, it reflects the Carlyles’ youthful fantasy that marriage would itself be a culminating event, ushering in an eternity of harmonious, selfless union. Insofar as the Everlasting Yea must be constantly cultivated through selfless labor, however, it signals the necessary revision of the Carlyles’ theory of married anti-self-consciousness. In and of itself, marriage provided little escape from self-consciousness. The vows made in marriage, however, did more than just make the partnership official, they also committed husband and wife to work that must, if need be, continue till death—the work of achieving and holding on to their dream of anti-self-conscious love.

The connection between the Everlasting Yea and the domestic hearth becomes all but explicit when the English Editor presents a passage Teufelsdröckh supposedly wrote while on a mountaintop as evidence that the passage through the Center of Indifference to the Everlasting
Yea can be geographically located. Though Carlyle is no doubt laughing at the Editor’s need to identify a physical site for what are, necessarily, spiritual events, the choice of images gives, nevertheless, the slightest glimpse at how Carlyle imagined his Everlasting Yea:

Beautiful it was to sit there, as in my skyey Tent, musing and meditating; . . . And then to fancy the fair Castles that stood sheltered in these Mountain hollows; with their green flower-lawns, and white dames and damosels, lovely enough: or better still, the straw-roofed Cottages, wherein stood many a Mother baking bread, with her children round her:—all hidden and protectingly folded up in the valley-folds; yet there and alive, as sure as if I beheld them. Or to see, as well as fancy, the nine Towns and Villages, that lay round my mountain-seat, which . . . proclaimed their vitality by repeated Smoke-clouds; whereon, as on a culinary horologe, I might read the hour of the day. For it was the smoke of cookery, as kind housewives, at morning, midday, eventide, were boiling their husband’s kettles; and ever a blue pillar rose up into the air . . . saying, as plainly as smoke could say: Such and such a meal is getting ready here. Not uninteresting! For you have the whole Borough, with all its love-making and scandal mongeries, contentions and contentments, as in miniature, and could cover it all with your hat. If, in any of my wide Wayfarings, I had learned to look into the business of the World in its details, here perhaps was the place for combining it into general propositions, and deducing inferences therefrom. (142-43)

While the beauty of the natural world certainly encourages Teufelsdröckh’s spiritual mood, his mind is filled primarily with real and imagined women in romantic and domestic scenes, first on the lawns of castles and then in the kitchens of farm houses. In contrast to the “love-making and scandal mongeries, contentions and contentments in miniature,” Teufelsdröckh implicitly connects the happy domestic scene of the housewives “boiling their husband’s kettles” with the kind of satisfying, anti-self-conscious work that exemplifies life in the Everlasting Yea. For Carlyle, love-making (and homemaking) are particularly effective ways of distracting the mind from its own self-tormentings. His “general propositions” (and what could be more general than the concept of the Everlasting Yea) are here depicted as growing out of domestic observations made from afar.
1831-1834: Publishing *Sartor Resartus*

Carlyle composed *Sartor* while the young couple was living on a solitary moorland farm in Scotland, Craigenputtock. For Carlyle, this quiet retreat from the world encouraged his creative faculties. Long afterwards, he would consider this place as the most suited to his writing (*Reminiscences* 78). While he developed his mystical philosophy, however, his new wife spent the day baking bread (an achievement she particularly prided herself on), cooking meals for her husband, and boiling the kettle for her husband’s tea. When scholars refer to this period in Welsh Carlyle’s life, they almost always focus on how her domestic responsibilities precluded literary pursuit and sacrificed her talents to those of her husband. In making such claims, however, these scholars underestimate the degree to which *Sartor Resartus* was a literary pursuit for Welsh Carlyle that engaged her thoughts and provided a space for their expression. There is no evidence, of course, that Welsh Carlyle wrote any part of the novel, nor need there be to validate this claim. There is, on the other hand, plenty of evidence that she not only read each new page of the manuscript as it was written, but that she (and Carlyle) considered the work to be the official statement of a personal philosophy that they had developed together. The couple understood *Sartor Resartus* as another installment in a story that had begun with their courtship. When Carlyle journeyed to London in order to find a publisher for the book, the couple once again wrote prolifically to each other, and it is in these letters that we see most clearly the romantic side of *Sartor*. After repeated rejections, for instance, Carlyle writes to his wife, letting her know that he takes “a kind of comfort” in the very fact that the novel has been completed—and not by him alone. “We have written him,” Carlyle writes, referring to the novel as a kind of mutual acquaintance or protégée (11 Sept. 1831, emphasis mine). Welsh Carlyle continues the
feint in her reply, assuring Carlyle that she, too, considers “his” completion sufficient reward in itself and dismisses public opinion as a matter of little weight:

Let him not trouble his dear little heart overmuch—Dreck is done for already and no Bookseller or body of booksellers, no discerning public—can undo him—not the Devil himself can undo him—If they will not publish him—bring him back and I will take care of him and read him and admire him—till we are enabled to publish him of our own account—. (18 Aug. 1831)

Clearly, “Dreck” belongs equally to both. His initial failure to get himself published causes indignation in the hearts of both Carlyles, and both, if necessary, will publish him on their “own account.” Welsh’s letters at this time also exhibit the stylistic peculiarities of the novel demonstrating the connection she felt to the work:

My beloved Dreck! my jewel of great price! The builders despise thee; but thou wilt yet be brought out with shoutings and I shall live to see thee in thy place—All these discouragements do but increase my confidence—as a candle burns brighter for being snuffed—for Dreck is imperishable, indestructible as the substance of the four elements—and all the Booksellerdom all Devildom cannot prevail against him! (1 Sept. 1831)

Who would not have attributed this passage to Thomas Carlyle if given out of context? Welsh effortlessly channels Carlyle, and in so doing she is, as Carlyle writes, his “own Prophetess and second Self” (29 Aug. 1831). In this sense, Sartor Resartus was the material product of their marital union, the evidence that their spiritual union had also made them “in very deed one!”

Welsh Carlyle grasps the connection between their married and literary lives when she describes with characteristic humor a dream she has had in his absence. “I fell asleep,” she writes, “and dreamt that a young man (Gustavus I think it must have been) was proposing to marry me—I asked him—‘do you subscribe to every opinion that Carlyle has put down in Teufelsdreck?’ He answered ‘Yes’ and I gave him my hand and said ‘that is so far good—’” (11 Aug. 1831). It is fitting that Welsh Carlyle expresses her enthusiasm for the text in a miniature marriage plot. She
re-contextualizes the novel, providing an alternate universe in which “every opinion that Carlyle
has put down in Teufelsdreck” has both spiritual and nuptial import.

What is perhaps most striking in this set of letters, however, is the degree to which both
Carlyles draw upon Sartor to communicate to each other the seriousness of their love. For
instance, when Carlyle writes a few light-hearted lines to reassure his wife of his constancy—
apparently Welsh Carlyle had expressed some teasing jealousy in a previous letter—the message
that starts out as amusingly pedestrian suddenly takes on an entirely different register:

I have yet taken up with no other women. . . . Nay, many as I see, light air-forms tripping
it on satin along the streets, or plumed Amazons curbing their palfreys in the Park with
pomp and circumstance enough,—there has no one yet fronted me, whom even to look at
I would exchange with my own. And to take into my bosom and clasp there as mine, ach
Gott! there is not such a one extant.—This is an original thought is it not? And yet could
any poetic or prophetic revelation please my Darling so, as this repeating of the thousand
time repeated? For the truth is, Jeannie, we love one another; which probably is the
greatest blessing in this highly blessed world. (22 Aug. 1831)

The most familiar and overused language is the best, and yet, even as poor Carlyle suggests that
a simple “I love you,” communicates more than any “prophetic revelation,” he can’t help himself
from slipping into the prophetic mode:

Yes, as proud as I am grown (for the more the Devil pecks at me the more vehemently do
I wring his nose), and standing on a kind of basis which I feel to be adamant, I perceive
that of all the women my own Jeannie is the wife for me: that in her bosom (once she
were a Mystic) a Man’s head is worthy to lie. Be a Mystic, Dearest; that is, stand with me
on the everlasting basis, and keep thy arms around me: thro’ life I fear nothing. (22 Aug.
1831)

The “Devil” of the Everlasting No rises, as it were, from the pages of the novel itself to menace
Carlyle, but like Teufelsdröckh, he has at this point in his life found something that he “feel[s] to
be adamant.” For the fictional philosopher this is simply his affirming faith in God’s everlasting
presence in the world; for Carlyle it is the unwavering belief in the co-jointly authored marriage
plot of their own lives which affirms that “Jeannie is the wife for [him],” and that they stand
together “on the everlasting basis” of true love. Believing in this truth requires just as much
mysticism as believing in God so firmly that all else disappears when met with the Everlasting Yea. As long as the Carlyles have this faith in one another, everything else will, presumably, fall into place. As Carlyle writes, “I have a problem which is possible: either to get Dreck printed, or to ascertain that I cannot and so tie him up and come home with him. So fear nothing, Love: I care not a doit for the worst; and thou too hast the heart of a heroine, art worthy of me were I the highest of heroes” (22 Aug. 1831). Carlyle’s novelistic language of heroes and heroines recalls the earlier letters that passed between them during their courtship, and again the lovers become confused with the products of their literary imaginations. But whereas in the courtship letters Carlyle and Welsh were to be hero and heroine in the novel they were writing, they now play the leads in the story of that novel’s long-awaited conclusion.

The completion of Sartor cannot be divorced from the consummation of their love affair. Novel and romance shared the same origin, simply splitting off to run parallel in two different ontological planes. Carlyle’s faith in Sartor and its philosophical relevance is part and parcel of his faith in matrimony:

Nay, my persuasion is that Teufk is in his place and his time here grows stronger the more I see of London and its philosophy: the Doctrine of the Phoenix of Nat. Supernaturalism and the whole Clothes Philosophy (be it but well stated) is exactly what all intelligent men are wanting. So again fear nothing; but kiss me, and bid me courage. Men talk of their Wives, and how a ‘married man’ must do this and beware of that (contrary to right), as if the Wife were a wretched drag on you, not a fellow Soldier brave as yourself, and true to the death. The Mystical School, be God thanked for it, is what we can call well married. Yes, Janekin, thou art mine; and I would not give thee for three kingdoms. (22 Aug. 1831)

Sartor’s publication will be a victory won with love, and the mystical education it offers Britain will be the same education required to be “well married.” Sartor Resartus, in other words, retails the marriage plot, the narration of which encourages readers how to find bliss outside of themselves, whether that bliss comes in the form of an Everlasting Yea or an Everlasting I Do.
He closes the letter begging his wife to keep faith, much as the novel exhorts its readers to have faith in the unseen, the symbolic, and never despair of purpose in a world that only appears to be a showy masquerade:

Think of me with constant affection as I do of thee. O are not we happy, were we ten times poorer? True to God; true to one another: there is our watchword. The Devil and the World cannot prevail against us: we will front all things, and not single but double. . . . Write boundlessly thyself, and kiss me and take me, and be my own Jane forever. Yes, auf ewig [eternally]!

Britain might always read Sartor Resartus as a secular pilgrimage tale, but the Carlyles undoubtedly read it as their own marriage plot. In creating it they were “not single but double,” Welsh Carlyle necessarily contributing half of the partly dreamed, partly lived romance. After his wife’s death, Carlyle wrote, “Oh, what a pain, pain, my poor Jeannie had to bear in this thorny pilgrimage of life; the unwitnessed Heroine, or witnessed only by me,—who never till now see it wholly!” (Reminiscences 87) The novel of a “hero and heroine such as the world never saw” was, of course, never written, or at least not in a way that could be “witnessed” by anyone other than themselves. For them alone, Sartor Resartus told the story of the unlikely hero and heroine, unlike any others in part because they could not be seen. Even so, Sartor continually renews their wedding vows, their public statement of “Yes, auf ewig,” yea everlasting, to a beautiful, if illusory romance.

1865: Remembering Forever

At the same time he was ordering her gravestone and writing The Reminiscences, Carlyle was re-reading all his wife’s old letters, soliciting more from the family and friends when he finished those he had already. Many he annotated, including her brief journal, sometimes identifying an unnamed individual or place and other times writing his own memories next to hers. This was
how he bade farewell to his “nobler second self” (Reminiscences 92). Writing Reminiscences in chronological order, starting with her own memories of childhood through to the last weeks of her life, Carlyle could not have helped being struck by how different married life had turned out to be from the fantasy that he and Welsh had dreamt up during their courting days. In grieving for his wife, he also grieved for the end of what he had almost convinced himself would be everlasting. Carlyle beautifully sums up the feeling in his own chest when he tries to write of a more universal condition: “Fools, fools; we forget that it has to end; lo this has ended” (92). The Carlyles strove to realize an everlasting peace in each other’s arms, but found themselves still striving when the promise of forever proved finite. And yet, maybe for a short time they did achieve something of that everlasting feeling, if not eternity itself. Carlyle writes:

she was never as happy again after that sunniest youth of hers, as in the last eighteen months, and especially the last two weeks of her life; when, after wild rain-deluges and black tempests many, the sun shone out again, for another’s sake, with full mild brightness, taking ‘sweet farewell’ (92).

When Welsh Carlyle knew her time was limited, she seems to have finally been able to let “the sun [shine] out again, for another’s sake,” to forget her own grievances in her concern for Carlyle, without fear of ever remembering them again. Carlyle found the thought “beautiful . . . and sad exceedingly” (92), but it was of some comfort that her life ended realizing the love they had so often failed at in life. There could be no such happy ending for Carlyle, however. He had no choice but to “take farewell of Her a second time . . . [to] sorrowfully end it, and seek for something else” (198).
Notes

1 For accounts of the accident see Ashton *Portrait of a Marriage* 444-45; Burdett 299-300; Campbell 122; Collis 170-73; Fielding and Sorensen 318; Kaplan 471-75; Morrison 166-67; Rose 255.

2 For accounts of this period of Carlyle’s life see Ashton, *Portrait of a Marriage*, 25-31; Burdett, 49-59; Campbell, 25-40; Collis, 17-30; Kaplan, 44-68; Morrison, 15-40; David Alec Wilson: 72-252.

3 Welsh Carlyle wrote in her journal on June 26, 1856, “The chief interest of today expressed in blue marks on my wrists!” (CLO) and Froude reports Jewsbury saying that she “remembered [the incident] only too well. The marks were made by personal violence” (22). For discussions of Froude’s biography of Carlyle and the resulting controversy see Dunn, *in passim*; Markus 299-312; Rose, 256-259.

4 For a discussion of the feminist reception of Jane Carlyle see Christianson, ”Finding Fault” 238-46; Christianson, “Constructing Reality” 15-24; Christianson, ”Jane Welsh Carlyle” 479-483; Chamberlain 63-75; Clarke, *Ambitious Heights*; Clarke, ”Jane Welsh Carlyle” 7-14; Clarke, ”Wonderful World” 220-229. For a brief summary of Carlyle biographies, see Ashton, *Portrait*, ix-xi; Kaplan 11-12.

5 An exception is found in some of the earlier studies of the Carlyles’ relationship. In his introduction Burdett emphasizes his intention of steering clear of “controversy” and to “draw [the Carlyles] without preconception” (8), but in his eagerness not to take sides he often paints their portrait a little too brightly. Ashton’s excellent and more recent *Portrait of a Marriage* presents one of the fairest accounts, but even this book tends to interpret early squabbles as the sign of disaster to come.

6 Carlyle writes, “Never since the beginning of time was there, that we hear or read of, so intensely self-conscious a society. Our whole relations to the universe and to our fellow-man have become an inquiry, a doubt; nothing will go of its own accord, and do its function quietly; but all things must be probed into, the whole working of man’s world be anatomically studied. Alas, anatomically studied, that it may be medically aided! Till at length, indeed, we have come to such a pass, that except in this same medicine, with it artifices and appliances, few can so much as imagine any strength or hope to remain for us.” (Characteristics 42-43).

7 Both James Eli Adams and Rebecca F. Stern have written helpfully about Carlyle’s public self-consciousness and the necessity of understanding Carlyle’s rhetoric decisions in the context of his difficult relationship to self-posturing. However, both critics draw on Carlyle’s discussion of morbid (personal) self-consciousness when making their arguments about self-consciousness in the public sphere. There can be no doubt that the two kinds of self-consciousness are intimately related, but in order to understand the niceties of their interrelation, we must be sure to establish our definitions of each separately and to identify (to the best of our ability) the precise meaning implied by given textual usage of the term (Adams 1-19, 21-60; Stern 423-449).

8 For accounts of the first meeting of Carlyle and Welsh see Ashton, *Portrait* 15-19; Burdett 60-74; Campbell 41-42; Collis 20-24; Kaplan 70-76; Morrison 39-46; Rose 28-29; Wilson 209-17.

9 Two articles have recently appeared on the Carlyle courtship, both emphasizing the tutelary nature of Carlyle’s wooing. Rosemary Ashton draws our attention to how Carlyle
introduced and helped teach the German language to Welsh, and to how the excitement surrounding a new and promising intellectual movement (into which they often seemed to be the sole initiates) colored their relationship and heightened the attraction they felt for one another (The Carlyles at Home 170-84). Norma Clarke takes a slightly different, if more familiar, tack in focusing on the erotics of learning by continuing the feminist tradition of reclaiming Welsh as a literary genius in her own right and portraying her as a woman of wasted talent, tragically lured into the domesticating clutches of an unhappy marriage by the promise of literary opportunity ("Wonderful World"). Certainly the thrill of German literature and the erotics of education added fuel to the romance of two such inquiring minds, but Ashton and Clarke barely scratch the surface of the love letters and the complicated psychological processes they point to. Most importantly, however, because their interest lies in Jane Welsh rather than in both her and Carlyle, neither article addresses the pivotal role Welsh and her correspondence played in Carlyle’s literary career and more particularly in the writing of Sartor Resartus.

10 For accounts of John Welsh’s death and his daughter’s reaction, see Burdett,32-35; Collis 17; Kaplan 70-71; Morrison 39-40; Rose 25-26.
11 CLO interprets the mark as a dash, Alexander Carlyle as a hyphen (94).
12 Some might say that she eventually succeeded at hanging herself with other, less fashionable necessities of nineteenth-century womanhood.
13 See, for example, Vicinus and Gilbert and Gubar.
14 The critical legacy of Hartman’s essay can be seen in pieces such as Warminiski’s “Facing Language: Wordsworth’s first Poetic Spirits” 26-49. Warminiski uses Hartman’s essay as the jumping off point for a discussion of Wordsworth and Romantic anti-self-consciousness. Without revisiting Carlyle or Mill, he then insists that “‘Anti-self-consciousness’ is not un-self-consciousness” (27), an assertion that would be difficult to support if he had consulted either the originator of the term or the man it was coined to describe.
15 Robert C. Wendling, in “Prophet and Friend: The Reflective Politics of Carlyle and Coleridge,”, 91-101, has tried to reconcile Carlyle’s statement by arguing that Carlyle does not reject all self-consciousness, but rather divides self-conscious thinking into healthy and unhealthy varieties. The first “remains immersed in nature and history” and “explain[s] phenomena in such a way as to provide a basis for confident action.” The second “occurs when new phenomena, unexplainable by past certainties, prompt a necessary skepticism, like Hume’s, that can seek certainty only by denying its possibility.” In contrast to healthy self-consciousness, Wendling continues, this “negative form of reflection effectively discourages action by forever questioning the grounds of it” (95). In making this distinction, Wendling seems to save Carlyle from anti-intellectualism, but the move is unnecessary. Carlyle was not opposed to thinking, but to thinking in reference to the self. It is significant then that in the analysis that follows this distinction Wendling generally substitutes “reflection” for the phrase self-consciousness. Carlyle advocates reflection in so far as it takes, to quote Wendling, “nature and history” as its object, always stopping short at self-reflection. Such an argument does not, however, as Wendling seems to believe, require an individual to approve of some amount of self-consciousness, a position that would only be true if to be a conscious self was the same thing as being self-conscious.
16 TC to JWC, 11 Sept. 1831, in CLO. One possible interpretation of the Carlyles’ repeated personification of Sartor Resartus, either by referring to it by the name of its main character or simply by personal pronouns, could, of course, be that the Carlyles saw the novel as
their literary progeny, the child they never had. It is difficult to say whether or not this was true at the time in question. By the time he wrote the Reminiscences, Carlyle had, certainly, begun to think in these terms:

No daughter or son of hers was to sit there; so it had been appointed us, My Darling. I have no Book thousandth-part so beautiful as Thou; but these were our only ‘Children,’—and, in a true sense, these were verily ours. And will perhaps live some time in the world, after we are both gone;—and be of no damage to the poor brute chaos of a world, let us hope!” (153).

In accepting a reproductive metaphor the critic risks turning Welsh Carlyle into a passive participant and downplaying her intellectual contribution to the books. In my opinion, however, Carlyle places emphasis on “hers,” “ours,” and finally “were verily ours,” in order to foreclose any interpretation of the metaphor in which his wife does not share equally in both genius and industry.
CHAPTER TWO:

Working Through:

Anti-Self-Conscious Labors of Body and Mind in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*

Elizabeth Gaskell instructed her publisher to send a complimentary copy of *Mary Barton* to Thomas Carlyle, whose strident denunciations of the class and labor politics in the industrial north of England had influenced her own treatment of Manchester in the novel. In acknowledgement of the gift, Carlyle wrote a deeply appreciative letter full of praise. The letter extols Gaskell’s “cheerfully pious, social, clear and observant character” and distinguishes *Mary Barton* from the “ordinary garbage of Novels,” deeming it “a Book which every intelligent person may read with entertainment, and which it will do every one some good to read” (*CLO*, 8 Nov 1848). Anticipating Gaskell’s future literary output, Carlyle offered advice that would prove both influential and puzzling to the young author:

> Unless I mistake, you are capable of going still deeper into this subject, and of bringing up Portraits of Manchester Existence still more strikingly *real*,—which latter quality is the grand value of them in the end.— Your writing is already very beautiful, soft, clear, and natural:—only learn ever more . . . to be *concise*; I mean not in words only, but in thought and conception; to reject the *un*essential more and more, and retain only the essential, at whatever cost of sacrifice:—this, well understood, is really the Law and the Prophets for a writer! Very fit that a good Book, or any other product that is to endure, have the *water* carefully roasted out of it. . . . In short, brevity and clear veracity . . . are “the soul of wit,”—the essence of all good qualities in writing. On the side of “veracity,” or devout earnestness of mind, I find you already strong; and that will tend well to help the other side of the matter if there be any defect there.

> May you live long to write good Books,—and to do *silently* good actions, which I believe is very much more indispensable! (*CLO*, 8 Nov 1848)

For the most part, Gaskell responded to the limelight cast upon her by *Mary Barton*’s success with ambivalence.¹ But not so to Carlyle’s letter. “In the midst of all my deep & great annoyance,” she wrote to her publisher, Edward Chapman, “Mr. Carlyle’s letter has been most valuable; and has given me the only \unmixed/pleasure I have yet received from the publication
of MB” (*Letters 64*). A month later, Gaskell still felt much the same way. “I had no idea [Mary Barton] would have proved such a fire brand,” she writes, again to Chapman, but laments, “meanwhile no one seems to see my idea of a tragic poem; so I, in reality, mourn over my failure.—Mr. Carlyle’s letter remains my real gain” (*Letters 68*).

Gaskell appreciated the letter, in part, for the sincere literary guidance it offered. “I do indeed value Mr. Carlyle’s note . . . it bears the stamp of honesty and truth; in the discriminate praise; and shows that he/thinks me worthy of being told of my faults,” she explained to Chapman, and she tried her best to benefit from Carlyle’s advice. (*Letters 65*). Two months after receiving the treasured letter, she was still puzzling over “which part [was] ‘the water’” Carlyle felt needed to be, as he put it, “carefully roasted out” (*Letters 69*). Every time she tried to “fix” on the liquid element, some part suddenly began to feel rather wet “till sometimes it all melt[ed] into water” (*Letters 69*). Despite these drawbacks to Carlyle’s fine sentences, Gaskell’s high opinion of his literary judgments did not wane. When she replied to Chapman’s intelligence of another lady writing a “manufacturing novel” a full five months after receiving Carlyle’s letter, her words—“I wish her every success. It is a large subject, & I think it ought to be written upon” (*Letters 72*)—echo his assessment of her own work—“I gratefully accept [Mary Barton] as a real contribution . . . towards . . . a huge subject, which has lain dumb too long” (*CLO*, 8 Nov 1848).

The importance that Gaskell attached to Carlyle’s letter reflects not only her faith in his literary advice, but the extent to which she had accepted his Gospel of Work as her essential duty. In a letter to Miss Lamont about the reaction to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell again touches on Carlyle’s letter. This time, writing to her friend and not her publisher, Gaskell paints herself less a literary apprentice than a spiritual disciple of the sage of Chelsea:

I had a letter from Carlyle, and when I am over-filled with thoughts arising from this book, I put it all aside, (or *try* to put it aside,) and think of his last sentence—‘May you
live long to write good books, or do silently good actions which in my sight is far more indispensable’

Did you read a little piece of Carlyle’s on the death of Charles Buller that appeared about a month ago in the London Examiner? I never heard of Chas Buller before; but was struck with the beautiful testimonial after his death; I think I can remember the exact words of one part—‘And in his patience with the much that he could not do, let us grant there was something very beautiful too.’ So dear Miss Lamont though your plans have failed partially and though your struggles have not met with the reward you desired . . . your patience with what you can not do will have something beautiful in it. (Letters 70)

It appears Gaskell was in the habit of studying Carlyle quite closely—to the point of learning some words by heart—especially where she found the opportunity for spiritual guidance. Gaskell had found strength amid the storms of critical review by repeating to herself the benediction closing Carlyle’s letter, and she repurposes his eulogy of Buller to comfort her struggling friend. But if Gaskell was guilty of a little hero worship, it was a very specific kind. Both of the lines she remembers and reminds herself of when she feels lost or confused—“May you live long to write good books, or do silently good actions which in my sight is far more indispensable”² and “in his patience with the much that he could not do, let us grant there was something very beautiful too”—offer working wisdom. They counsel that the best course of action in time of doubt and uncertainty is simply to act, not to draw attention to one’s achievements or even to worry whether anything will be achieved. This is Carlyle’s Gospel of Work. By working “silently,” by working despite what he or she “can not do,” an individual may at least drive away painful, unproductive thoughts with purposeful employment.

It is appropriate that we should find Gaskell proselytizing Carlyle’s Gospel of Work shortly after the publication of Mary Barton, for the novel was, itself, a testament to the efficacy of this modus operandi. In 1845 Gaskell lost her only son to scarlet fever and fell into a deep and debilitating depression. Her husband suggested she attempt a work of fiction in order to distract herself from the painful memories. Gaskell’s story is now a familiar one, but as her response to
Carlyle’s letter demonstrates, it is more than just an interesting biographical detail. Gaskell was not merely following the advice of her husband; she was also following that of Carlyle. Laying aside her grief and picking up her pen, Gaskell proved herself a disciple of teachings Carlyle recommended not to grieving mothers but to an industrializing England. In *Mary Barton* Gaskell both preaches and challenges Carlyle’s Gospel as she gives narrative form to the psychology and politics of labor. Throughout the novel, characters mimic their creator and busy themselves when life seems too hard to bear. However, Gaskell also exposes the tragic insufficiency of the Gospel for those condemned to enforced idleness by the impersonal boom and bust cycles of trade.

**Carlyle’s Gospel of Work**

"*Older than all preached Gospels was this unpreached, inarticulate, but ineradicable, forever-enduring Gospel: Work, and therein have wellbeing*"

Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (200)

Carlyle’s Gospel of Work comes to us most directly from *Past and Present*, but it is best understood in the context of the general theory of anti-self-consciousness begun in Carlyle’s earlier writings. Already in *Characteristics*, Carlyle is thinking about work as a medium for anti-self-conscious experience. In the essay, he declares nineteenth-century Britain to be suffering from a deep-rooted disease, the primary symptom of which is a morbid self-consciousness. Throughout the essay, he avers that to be conscious, to think about something, is a sign of sickness, equating self-consciousness with stagnation and un-self-consciousness with action. Work is, in fact, one of the few strategies Carlyle offers for tricking our naturally introspective minds into looking outward:

The good man is he who *works* continually in welldoing; to whom welldoing is as his natural existence, awakening no astonishment, requiring no commentary; but there, like a thing of course, and as if it could not but be so. Self-contemplation, on the other hand, is infallibly the symptom of disease, be it or be it not the sign of cure. An unhealthy Virtue
is one that consumes itself to leanness in repenting and anxiety; or, still worse, that inflates itself into dropsical boastfulness and vain-glory: either way, there is a self-seeking; an unprofitable looking behind us to measure the way we have made: whereas the sole concern is to walk continually forward, and make more way. (17)

In this passage we can already begin to see several of Carlyle’s primary thoughts when it comes to work. First, work is opposed to self-contemplation or self-consciousness and is the healing salve for these states of mind. Second, in order for work to be successful at its remedial function, it must itself be un-self-conscious and go unremarked. Carlyle warns, “whisper not to thy own heart, How worthy is this action! - for then it is already becoming worthless” (16-17). This outlook creates considerable difficulty for Carlyle as a writer since, in order to promote work, he must constantly propound the worthiness of work and not always in a whisper. This problem, of course, is at the heart of the essay as a whole—nothing could be more self-conscious (and thus more diseased) than a self-conscious essay on self-consciousness. Carlyle, however, forges on, working out his philosophy of modern life even as he declares that “the mere existence and necessity of a Philosophy is an evil” because it grows out of “speculative thinking” (54).

Finally, and for the purposes of this chapter perhaps most importantly, work as understood in Characteristics quiets morbid self-consciousness because by working we fulfill our purpose as human beings. “Man is sent hither not to question, but to work,” he writes; “‘the end of man,’ it was long ago written, ‘is an Action, not a Thought’” (54). Nowhere is it clearer than in the following bit of Carlylean metaphysics that work is both the purpose of human life and its moral imperative:

Nevertheless, doubt as we will, man is actually Here; not to ask questions, but to do work: in this time, as in all times, it must be the heaviest evil for him, if his faculty of Action lie dormant, and only that of sceptical Inquiry exert itself. Accordingly whoever looks abroad upon the world, comparing the Past with the Present, may find that the practical condition of man in these days is one of the saddest; burdened with miseries which are in a considerable degree peculiar. In no time was man's life what he calls a happy one; in no time can it be so. A perpetual dream there has been of Paradises . . . but
it was a dream merely; an impossible dream. Suffering, contradiction, error, have their quite perennial, and even indispensable abode in this Earth. Is not labour the inheritance of man? And what labour for the present is joyous, and not grievous? Labour, effort, is the very interruption of that ease, which man foolishly enough fancies to be his happiness; and yet without labour there were no ease, no rest, so much as conceivable. Thus Evil, what we call Evil, must ever exist while man exists: Evil, in the widest sense we can give it, is precisely the dark, disordered material out of which man's Freewill has to create an edifice of order and Good. Ever must Pain urge us to Labour; and only in free Effort can any blessedness be imagined for us. (60-61)

The greatest evil faced by human kind is, in a word, inactivity, the failure to fulfill that post-lapsarian injunction to work. But the penalty comes with a promise. Our world is “dark, disordered” and essentially evil—until by the exertion of our freewill we decide to work, for only then can we “create an edifice of order and Good.” In such a world, happiness per se is impossible. Nevertheless we can hope by our labor to achieve blessed forgetfulness of self.

In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle develops his theory of anti-self-consciousness more fully as a narrative. Interestingly enough, however, work plays almost no role in Teufelsdröckh’s pilgrimage from the Everlasting No through the Centre of Indifference and into the Everlasting Yea. That said, work does occasionally appear in Teufelsdröckh’s Philosophy of Clothes. For instance, at the outset of Teufelsdröckh’s abbreviated *bildungsroman*, a description of the “Children’s games” that occupied the “miniature Professor” provides the occasion for a more general reflection on the inherent purposefulness of human life, on how “the Mankin feels that he is born Man, that his vocation is to Work” (71). In *Sartor Resartus*, “our Whole Duty” is even more emphatically than in *Characteristics* “to Move, to Work,—in the right direction” (99).

“Produce! Produce!” Teufelsdröckh enjoins the reader:

> Were it but a pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it in God’s name! ‘Tis the utmost thou hast in thee; out with it then. Up, up! Whate’er thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called To-day, for the Night cometh wherein no man can work. (149)
Despite the urgency of this pronouncement, however, work is but uneasily integrated into Carlyle’s metaphysical allegory. After all, Teufelsdröckh is presented to us as a curiously unproductive philosopher, whose masterwork, in fact, must be pieced together in a most unsatisfactory manner by a most unsatisfactory English editor. Furthermore, reaching the Everlasting Yea—the figurative achievement of permanent un-self-consciousness—does not hinge on active employment but on a rejection, a re-birth, and an affirmation. Nevertheless, work does make an unexpected appearance at the very moment Teufelsdröckh realizes the Everlasting Yea. After a rather long and ecstatic description of Teufelsdröckh’s secular rapture in which he glimpses that “there is a Higher than Love of Happiness,” that there is a “Blessedness” and a “Godlike in Man,” he dramatically sums up the transformative process:

The Self in thee needed to be annihilated. By benignant fever-paroxysms is Life rooting out the deep-seated chronic Disease, and triumphs over Death. On the roaring billows of Time, thou art not engulfed, but born aloft into the azure of Eternity. Love not Pleasure; love God. This is the EVERLASTING YEA, wherein all contradiction is solved; wherein whoso walks and works, it is well with him. (148, emphasis mine)

In our discussion of this passage in chapter one, we paid but scant attention to the final words. They do not, in fact, seem to fit with the rest of the paragraph. After all, the three-chapter pilgrimage that forms the center of the novel is so allegorical, so unmoored from anything like the temporal restraints of reality or the recognizable features of daily life, that anything as mundane and practical as work (no matter how grandiloquent its expression) jars our sense of literary decorum. When the self has been “annihilated,” when Life . . . triumphs over Death,” when the “roaring billows of time” prove powerless against the individual, and he is “born aloft into the azure of Eternity” where “all contradiction is solved,” one might be forgiven for assuming that work has been laid aside with all other trappings of our mortal existence (146). In fact, it is precisely when Carlyle declares all contradiction to have been solved, I would argue,
that he ends up contradicting himself by yoking the transcendent to the temporal and thereby illuminating a persistent source of tension at the heart of his evolving theory of anti-self-consciousness. Carlyle posits un-self-consciousness as the ideal state of being in the world while constantly demonstrating its unsustainability.

Carlyle’s theory of anti-self-consciousness shuttles back and forth between candid acknowledgements of the inevitability of self-consciousness and prophetic pronouncements of its ultimate defeat. As discussed in chapter one, Carlyle described his impending union with Jane Welsh and Teufelsdröckh’s ascension into the Everlasting Yea as abstract states of being that make sense only in the end times. They are permanent, unchanging, and un-self-conscious, that is, impossible or at least unsustainable in this life. Nevertheless, these utopic visionary states are essential for Carlyle’s theory of anti-self-consciousness because they provide the necessary hope and motivation to carry on in the face of despair. But if work successfully wards off self-destructive introspection, it is also never done. Nowhere does Carlyle suggest that we can work our way to un-self-consciousness, to the Everlasting Yea. We work, rather, until “the Night cometh wherein no man can work.” It is, we might say, how we practice anti-self-consciousness. The unifying theory that encompasses both the visionary (but impossible) achievement of un-self-consciousness and the temporary (but practicable) approximation of un-self-consciousness, i.e., the Everlasting Yea and work, respectively, could never quite be realized.

In *Sartor Resartus*, the visionary outweighs the practical. The teleological pull of the Everlasting Yea is most frequently tethered to one’s spiritual willpower, not to one’s temporal work ethic. By the time Carlyle is writing *Chartism* and *Past and Present*, however, the balance has shifted. Carlyle must keep one foot on the ground to address the socio-economic problems of industrial England, but just one, and as Rob Breton notes, the resulting blend of prophecy and
politics is inadequate to the subject. Crediting Carlyle for his “nitty-gritty discussions of economic reality and his vitriolic attack on moneyed relations” (44), Breton faults the Gospel as propounded in *Past and Present* for subordinating its potential radicalism to a “representation of work as utopia, as ideal in itself” (45). By insisting on work for work’s sake and the intrinsic value of work outside the cash nexus, Breton argues, Carlyle separates Work from labor, “isolating the Gospel from economics, factory life, exploitation, alienation, and the realm of necessity” (45). While it is true that statements such as “blessed is he who has found his work: let him ask no other blessedness” (*Past* 195) are but thinly veiled apologies for bourgeois hegemony, it would be injudicious to claim that this is all the Gospel of Work ever set out to be. Even Breton admits that Carlyle’s glorification of work was not “primarily interested in mobilizing a worker’s army to do capitalism’s labor or in justifying the ascendancy of the middle class” (45). Contextualizing the Gospel of Work as it is articulated in either of these texts within Carlyle’s developing oeuvre usefully reminds us that Carlyle did not begin with the condition of the working classes and then develop the Gospel of Work either to liberate or further oppress its constituent members. Rather, Carlyle began with a still evolving theory of anti-self-consciousness—one strain of which concerned a gospel of work—and applied it, as best he could, to material conditions he found both deplorable and perplexing. In *Past and Present* he writes:

> For there is a perennial nobleness and even sacredness in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair. (195)

One the one hand, by insisting on the religious nature of work, Carlyle echoes the message discussed earlier in relation to the beatitude “blessed is he who has found his work: let him ask no other blessedness.”. On the other hand, by declaring that a man who works always has “hope” and that “in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair,” Carlyle implies that much of the
responsibility for the current condition of England lies at the feet of mill owners and other members of the middle class who refuse work to the willing and thus deprive them of hope itself. As he writes in *Chartism*, a “man willing to work, and unable to find work, is perhaps the saddest sight that Fortune's inequality exhibits under this sun” (24). Both of these messages are central to Carlyle’s Gospel of Work. However, the manner in which these two tenets are expressed (the sacral language, the emphasis on hope and despair) reminds us that Carlyle has not separated the Gospel of Work as social reform from the Gospel as spiritual practice. Almost immediately after the above passage Carlyle continues:

> The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it. ‘Know thyself:’ long enough has that poor ‘self’ tormented thee; thou wilt never get to ‘know’ it, I believe! Think it not thy business, this of knowing thyself; thou art an unknowable individual: know what thou canst work at, and work at it,—like a very Hercules! That will be thy better plan. (*Past* 195)

Here, Carlyle himself defines his “Gospel” of work. He might as well be defining his theory of anti-self-consciousness. Gone is the discussion of mobs and strikes; gone, too, the discussion of political economy and laissez-faire. Once again, work is the escape from self-consciousness, from the mind that preys upon itself—whether in John Barton’s humble lodging or Elizabeth Gaskell’s brightly lit drawing room.

**The Work of Grieving**

> The tale was formed, and the greater part of the first volume was written when I was obliged to lie down constantly on the sofa, and when I took refuge in the invention to exclude the memory of painful scenes which would force themselves upon my remembrance. (Letters 74)

*Mary Barton*’s preface begins in grief. Gaskell situates her tragic “Tale of Manchester Life” within a tragic tale of her own life in Manchester. “Three years ago,” she writes, “I became
anxious (from circumstances that need not be more fully alluded to) to employ myself in writing a work of fiction” (5). Hilary Schor reads the opening line of the preface as largely performative, part of a business-savvy self-presentation that simultaneously protected Gaskell from the stigma of the literary woman and invested her with maternal authority. “The myth of the grieving mother,” Schor writes, “disguises” her professional “canniness” (24). Most critics, however, are willing to allow that Gaskell’s personal sorrow played a role in more than just the marketing of novel and, at the very least, sensitized her to the suffering of those outside her own class. The experience of losing her son, Jean E. Kennard writes, “gave [Gaskell] increased sympathy for the lot of the Manchester poor” (48). And as Deborah Epstein Nord explains, Gaskell “believed herself particularly well placed to explain to her own class the sensibility and grievances of the Lancashire workers” in part “because she had seen her child die” (146). Even Schor, herself, admits that Gaskell’s “own experience of loss” gave her the “emotional vocabulary” necessary “to express the alienation and empty desire of the workers she depicts” (42). Others are willing to lend even more interpretive significance to Gaskell’s grief. Ellen Moers, for instance, sees Mr. Carson and John Barton as foils not only of each other but of the author herself by virtue of their shared identity as parents who have lost their only sons (30).

Rosemarie Bodenheimer places the most weight on the connection between Gaskell’s bereavement and the writing of *Mary Barton*, going so far as to argue that the novel is actually “*about* responding to the grief of loss or disappointment” (510, emphasis mine). Gaskell’s writing process, her translation of private grief into public voice, according to Bodenheimer, reinvents itself thematically in the novel where the sorrows of working class families become the grounds for public acts of class solidarity. Carol Lansbury makes a similar point when she observes: “the novel had its source in personal grief; its resolution is found in the continuing life
of society” (10). However, it is precisely this movement from private grief to public action that Bodenheimer finds most problematic for the novel as a whole. Gaskell may have chosen to seek the public stage rather than remain isolated in her private sorrow, but in the novel, Bodenheimer argues, the public sphere is really only a “threatening place of resort in the desperation of poverty or injustice,” while the “proper forum for grief is the familial and neighborly world (527-28). If the novel sets out to recommend the productive sublimation of private grief in public action, it comes up short for Bodenheimer, who is ultimately unable to allow that the novel successfully integrates the domestic and public realms:

Starting and ending always with personal grief, the novel is only secondarily about politics as such. Politics figures rather like romance, as a form of ‘bodily or mental action’ that might alleviate or muffle the pain of domestic grief and suffering that is represented as the fundamental matter of experience. (527)

Undoubtedly, the novel is deeply invested in “the pain of domestic grief,” but to say that the novel “is only secondarily about politics” is to overlook the fact that Gaskell sympathized with more than the personal experience of losing a child. She also, because of the particular way in which the loss of her own child affected her psychologically, sympathized with the mental sufferings associated with unemployment.

After all, when Gaskell writes of being “anxious . . . to employ [herself] in writing a work of fiction” (5), a secondary meaning of “employ,” i.e., to hire, looms in the background, linking Gaskell’s domestic hardship to that of the working classes of Manchester. The relationship between the unemployment which threatens the bereaved mother and that which threatens the mill worker is deeply important to the novel. As Susan Zlotnick observes:

Throughout the writing of Mary Barton, Gaskell’s chief enemy was inactivity, whether it was the moral laziness of the British public, seemingly indifferent to the tragedies of men like John Barton, or the destructive, indulgent, and idle speculations Gaskell herself engaged in after the death of her infant son, and to which Mary Barton, begun at the urging of her husband, was the remedial measure. So, it is only fitting that a novel born
out of Gaskell’s own personal and political desire for action should be a text about the perils of inactivity. (76)

And yet, for Zlotnick, this central concern of the novel is ultimately reducible to Gaskell’s primary, bourgeois feminist purpose. Zlotnick’s larger argument is that women writing about industrial England like Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë differed from their male counterparts such as Carlyle and Disraeli in believing that rather than marking the lamentable deterioration of traditional values and ways of life, an industrial England promised an expansion in the vocational opportunities afforded to women as well as a hope for their financial independence. In other words, women writers wanted to expose the inhuman cruelty of individual mill owners while lauding industrialism as such. In writing a “novel about unemployment,” Zlotnick explains:

[Gaskell] meets the demands made by her dual objectives: she exposes to the public the pitiable circumstances under which Manchester’s workers live without condemning the factory system as an inherent and unalterable evil. Gaskell saves Victorian industrialism by shifting the focus of her novel from the dangers of factory work to the dangers of being out of work: *Mary Barton* does not so much address the “crushing experience of industrialism” (Williams, *Culture and Society* 88) as it does the crushing experience of unemployment. (76)

The distinction between male and female approaches to Victorian industrialization, however, is a somewhat slippery one. In fact, as the opening discussion of their letters suggested, Gaskell saw herself most in keeping with Carlyle when she counseled activity.

No one was more concerned about the “crushing experience of unemployment” (i.e., morbid self-consciousness) than Carlyle. In *Sartor Resartus* he writes:

Most true it is, as a wise man teaches us, that ‘Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by Action.’ On which ground too let him who gropes painfully in darkness or uncertain light, and prays vehemently that the dawn may ripen into day, lay this other precept well to heart, which to me was of invaluable service: ‘Do the Duty which lies nearest thee,’ which thou knowest to be a Duty! Thy second Duty will already have become clearer. (148)
Far from deviating from her male contemporary, Gaskell, in the preface to *Mary Barton*, describes herself as following Carlyle’s doctrine quite literally. Struggling to accept Willie’s death, Gaskell does the duty that lies nearest her. Though she originally intended to write “a tale, the period of which was more than a century ago, and the place on the borders of Yorkshire,” Gaskell ultimately decided to write about something closer to home and nearer at hand, “the romance of the lives of some of those who elbowed [her] daily in the busy streets of the town in which [she] resided” (5). She discovered her “duty” simply attending to “the expression of feelings on the part of some of the work-people” which could everywhere be heard if someone took the time to listen (5).

*Mary Barton* is a novel deeply invested in anti-self-consciousness, in the desire to escape morbid introspection during times of unemployment whether brought on by grief or slack trade. Gaskell’s novel rebukes the bourgeoisie for wasting precious time and energy in self-examination that could be spent seeking out the underlying causes of poverty and suffering just outside their door. What is remarkable about Gaskell’s novel, however, is that she portrays the working classes as beset by the same self-conscious demons traditionally associated with only the leisured classes. Gaskell realized that the abuses suffered by the working class in Manchester were both physical and psychological and that prolonged unemployment, in either class, created a psychological environment inimical to hope—and social change.

**Death Wishes**

“Now came the time to be thankful that the early dead were saved from the evil to come” *(Mary Barton 322)*

Anti-self-conscious desire easily morphs into a death wish. In the absence of hope for future employment, Gaskell shows that the longing to be free from self-destructive introspection slips
into a longing for total unconsciousness—for death. Among the working class in Manchester, the suicidal side-effect of self-consciousness is compounded by the fact that, in many cases, the ever-present threat of death is, already, one of the principle reasons for anxiety. John Lucas writes that “one of the very best things about Mary Barton is the feel of poverty as its consequences eat into a man, and the sense of the surrounding, ubiquitous city, which imposes hideous conditions on a life from which there is no easy escape” (163). Figuratively, “the feel of poverty” is the feel of morbid self-consciousness—the wearying mental anxiety that accompanies the precarious existence of the worker whose life is entirely dependent on two unsympathetic masters—the millowner and the market. But Lucas’s assessment of the “feel of poverty” works on a literal level as well, for the anxious mind may very well be joined in its cannibalistic efforts by a starving body forced to consume itself for energy. Dark thoughts eat into a man as he watches his starving body feed upon itself.

Throughout the novel, mental and physical hardship become inextricably bound in a death wish. Mr. Davenport’s last words are “O lord God! I thank thee, that the hard struggle of living is over” (65). Death is a blessing for Davenport, who longs more than anything for physical and mental relief, and far from questioning the morality of his death wish, Gaskell lets Davenport’s own body testify to the justness of his desire. His “face gr[ows] beautiful, as the soul neared God,” and a “peace beyond understanding” is written in his features (65). If you saw his face, Gaskell implies, you could not doubt that in death, there is “[n]o more grief or sorrow for him” (65). Davenport’s wife, however, is unwilling to let go. At the moment of death when he cries out, “Oh lord God,” she cries out, “‘Oh Ben! Ben! . . . have you no thought for me?” echoing both his words and those of the dying Christ. Ben, however, is not the one who has forsaken her, of course, but the Carson family, who laid him off when their mill burned. Gaskell
drives this point home through contrast. While Wilson waits at Carson’s leisure for an infirmary order for the dying man, the reader gets a glimpse of how far removed the well-to-do family is from merciful deaths such as Davenport’s. Flitting up to her father, Amy Carson, the youngest in the family, declares that she, for one, “can’t live without flowers and scents,” that it is “one of her necessaries,” and that “[l]ife [is] not worth living without flowers” (64). The message seems clear. Davenport may see little value in God’s most precious gift, but it is the Carsons who have devalued it, by allowing the price of Davenport’s life to depreciate in order to protect their own.

Davenport’s life is not the only one valued at a sorry price. When George Wilson dies, Barton insists that it was “best for him to die” (89). Mary, too, bemoans her life from time to time. When longing for Jem, Mary turns Marianna:

“Mary’s cry was ever the old moan of the Moated Grange—
‘Why comes he not?’ she said,
‘I am aweary, aweary.
I would that I were dead’ (139).

When she hears of Carson’s murder, Mary again longs to be put out of her misery:

She wished to be as near death as Alice, and to have struggled through this world, whose sufferings she had early learnt, and whose crimes now seemed pressing close upon her. Old texts from the Bible, that her mother used to read (or rather spell out) aloud in the days of childhood, came up to her memory. ‘Where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.’ ‘And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,’ etc. And it was to this world that Alice was hastening! Oh! that she were Alice! (193).

Mary regains a lust for life briefly while trying to find an alibi for her lover, but when she fails to bring Will back from the John Cropper, she decides “it would be better she were lost than found” (260) and considers drowning herself:

She sat down quietly on the top step of the landing, and gazed down into the dark, dank water below. Once or twice a spectral thought loomed among the shadows of her brain; a wonder whether beneath that cold dismal surface there would not be rest from the troubles of earth. (261)
Like so many marriage plot novels, *Mary Barton* seems ready at this moment to become a courtship novel of a very different stamp. Mary’s figurative confession of sexual sin threatens to end in a watery grave rather than in the loving arms of her lover, demonstrating once again how thin is the line between romantic and suicidal anti-self-conscious desire. Even that paragon of moral rectitude and self-reliance, Jem Wilson declares, “Better we were all dead,” when Esther tells him, “it would be better for [Mary] to die” than to follow on her Aunt’s downward trajectory from seduction to prostitution (144), and he has “scarcely any desire for life” after his arrest for Carson’s murder (288). His own mother echoes this sentiment. Right before Jem’s trial, Job tries to comfort her with the hope that Mary will return with the alibi and that “It will all end right.” Mrs. Wilson agrees with the sentiment, but for a different reason entirely:

“It will all end right,” echoed she; “but not as thou tak’st it. Jem will be hung, and will go to his father and the little lads, where the Lord God wipes away all tears, and where the Lord Jesus speaks kindly to the little ones, who look about for the mothers they left upon earth. Eh, Job, yon’s a blessed land, and I long to go to it, and yet I fret because Jem is hastening there. I would not fret if he and I could lie down to-night to sleep our last sleep; not a bit would I fret if folk would but know him to be innocent—as I do.” (266-67)

Though she still frets about Jem’s reputation, Mrs. Wilson is able to find a sober comfort in the thought that through death the family may be reunited. For the Wilsons and Bartons, as well as the Davenports, the desire to be together as a family is always a desire to lay their burden down. Finally, when Barton returns home at the end of the novel, Mary feels “that for her father there [is] but one thing to be desired and anticipated, and that was death!” (322). Scattering her scenes of both pathos and sentimentality with expressions of extreme anti-self-conscious desire and the wish to die, Gaskell imparts to the entire text a feeling of precarious mortality and ambivalence about life, precisely the feeling she wants her readers to recognize as governing the life of the poor who live their lives ever on the edge of the abyss. The terrible irony in *Mary Barton* is that
in order to quiet the suicidal thought patterns set in motion by prolonged periods of unemployment, one must find work.

**The Gospel According to Gaskell**

The value of labor is not simply to be found in the necessities it can purchase and the flesh it can support, but in the mental health it can maintain. Even well-fed bodies (like Gaskell’s after the death of her son) need meaningful employment. For instance, despite her wealth, Mrs. Carson suffers from headaches that are “the natural consequence of the state of mental and bodily idleness in which she was placed” (178). If health was her object, the narrator explains, “[i]t would have done her more good than all the ether and sal-volatile she was daily in the habit of swallowing, if she might have taken the work of one of her own housemaids for a week” (178). The way to avoid hypochondriacal complaints is to refocus self-directed energies onto the world lest, as the English editor warns in *Sartor Resartus*, the soul be “forced thereby like Sir Hudibras’s sword by rust:”

To eat into itself, for lack
Of something else to hew and hack! (100).

Because Mrs. Carson has neither physical employment nor “education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure,” she “indulg[es] in the luxury of a headache” allowing what natural gifts she may once have had to atrophy until all she is left with is what the servants appropriately term “a wind in the head” (178).

Gaskell counters the negative example of Mrs. Carson with the positive one of Mary. Over the course of the novel Mary becomes a disciple of Carlyle’s Gospel of Work. The love triangle between Mary, Jem, and young Carson develops because, in her ignorance of Carlyle’s teachings, Mary longs for idleness and dreams of “some day becoming a lady, and doing all the
elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood” (73). And though the sage of Chelsea never sends Mary a letter, Gaskell provides her heroine with a kind of proxy—a blind seer named Margaret. Early in the novel, Margaret affirms her faith in the gospel of work when she tells Mary that, as silly as they may seem, mourning clothes “do good” by “setting people (as is cast down by sorrow and feels themselves unable to settle to anything but crying) something to do” (43–44). The Ogden widow and her daughters “cheered up wonderful,” Margaret explains, when she helped them plan their dress orders, simply because it gave them “something to talk over and fix about” (44). Mary is a quick study and immediately puts her friend’s theory into practice. When the conversation turns to Margaret’s failing eyesight, Mary, “aware of her inability to comfort” in this trying situation, turns news of the factory fire into an unexpected opportunity to “change the current of Margaret’s thoughts” with an excursion to see the flames (46). In fact, from this moment on, Mary constantly applies Margaret’s advice whenever her feelings become too heavy. When her father goes to London, she welcomes the “distractions and events of the broad full day,” for they “occupy her with the present, and . . . deaden the memory of the absent” (81). A “humble cheerful meal” with Will and the Leghs provides “a pleasant little interlude” in her habitual anxiety about her father and her love life by “distract[ing] her attention for a few hours from the pressure of many uneasy thoughts, of the dark heavy, oppressive times” (138). Shortly thereafter, Mary admits to Will that at times she wishes she “were a boy” so that she, too, could go to sea when times are tough and it’s “very hard to keep up one’s heart” or be “left alone” (170). She spends that night “toss[ing] about, trying to get quit of the ideas that harassed her, and longing for the light when she could rise, and find some employment” (188). When the time comes to test Mary’s mettle, action has become second nature for the heroine in times of trouble.
The same cannot be said of Mary’s father. Where she acts, he thinks. When the doctor sees the condition of Barton’s wife, he tells Barton to go downstairs, which the latter does “mechanically and [sits] down on the first chair” with “no hope” (21). Shortly thereafter, the doctor explains how Mrs. Barton died to her husband’s “unheeding ears, which yet retained his words to ponder on; words not for immediate use in conveying sense, but to be laid by, in the storehouse of memory, for a more convenient season” (21). Rather than living in the moment, processing the information that comes, Barton holds onto it so that he can torment himself with it later. He sits “like a stock or a stone, so rigid, so still” (21), and when the neighbor comes downstairs looking for soap and water, he does “not speak, or offer to help” even though the neighbor is looking in all the wrong places. All he does is think:

He tried to realize [his wife’s death]—to think it possible. And then his mind wandered off to other days, to far different times. He thought of their courtship; of his first seeing her, an awkward beautiful rustic, far too shiftless for the delicate factory work to which she was apprenticed; of his first gift to her, a bead necklace, which had long ago been put by, in one of the deep drawers of the dresser, to be kept for Mary. He wondered if it was there yet, and with a strange curiosity he got up to feel for it; for the fire by this time was well nigh out, and candle he had none. His groping hand fell on the piled-up tea-things, which at his desire she had left unwashed till morning—they were all so tired. He was reminded of one of the daily little actions, which acquire such power when they have been performed for the last time by one we love. He began to think over his wife’s daily round of duties: and something in the remembrance that these would never more be done by her, touched the source of tears, and he cried aloud. (21-22)

Barton does not just think, he tries to think, and in so doing sets off a string of memories torturous in their tenderness. And though himself in a “stupor” (22), Barton seems particularly drawn to memories of his wife’s activity, of the factory work for which she was not suited and then the “daily little actions” and “daily round of duties” that constituted her married life. What makes these last memories so poignant, Gaskell tells us, is that “they have been performed for the last time,” that they will “never more be done by her.” Barton does not begin to do the dishes
he finds unwashed. He ponders the fact that they will be washed no more. Mourning the loss of his wife’s activity, he himself becomes paralyzed.

Barton’s reaction is directly compared to his daughter’s. Mary’s immediate response to the death of her mother is to bury her face in the bedclothes and cram them “into her mouth, to keep down the choking sobs” (21). Momentarily immobilized by grief, Mary’s instinctive reaction, nevertheless, is to control her emotions, to put restrictions on her pain which enables her, while her father reflects on the past, to get up and begin “mechanically help[ing] the neighbor in all the attentions to the dead.” Mary “mechanically” works and Barton “mechanically” sits. Mary “reserve[s] the luxury of a full burst of grief till she should be alone.” And when the neighbor leaves she closes the door to her mother’s room and shakes with grief, sobbing out, “Oh, mother! Mother, are you really dead! Oh, mother, mother!” Giving in to one’s grief is, as the narrator points out, “a luxury,” and one that Mary, at first intends to enjoy. But after crying for a while, she stops “because it flash[es] across her mind that her violence of grief might disturb her father.” Having quieted herself, she hears “the sobs of her father’s grief; and quickly, quietly, stealing down the steps, she [kneels] by him, and kiss[es] his hand” (22).

Mary’s concern for others enables her to come out of herself and do the duty that lies nearest, caring for her father. Though a child, this decision to act, to not further indulge in the “luxury” of grief, sets in motion the kind of reciprocal care Gaskell sees as imperative for the well-being of individuals and Manchester. Barton takes “no notice at first” of Mary’s presence “for his burst of grief would not be controlled” (22). But when Mary, having made this noble effort to comfort her father, breaks down again herself, “her shriller sobs, her terrified cries” call him out of his self-pity and he “check[s] himself” to console her: “Child, we must be all to one another, now she is gone” (22). If father and child are to survive their great loss they must be the
cause for each other’s existence. Mary must allow herself to be the reason her father carries on. And he must be the same for her. Mary’s response shows that she understands: “Oh, father, what can I do for you? Do tell me! I’ll do anything!” (22).

Forgetting one’s own sorrows in caring for another, however, is easier said than done—especially when those you love are constantly being taken away, leaving you alone with yourself once more. Barton experiences three tragic losses in the novel, each of which loosens “[o]ne of the ties which bound him down to the gentle earth”—the loss of his son, the loss of his wife, and the loss of the Charter (23). Though the rejection of the Charter is not, technically speaking, the same as death of the loved one, the novel is so persistent in its grouping of the three incidents that it is clear Gaskell wanted to harness some of the imaginative sympathy she was able to inspire for personal grief to political grievances.

For instance, when Barton returns home from his ill-fated journey to London as one of the Chartist delegates, he is received by his daughter in a manner that strongly recalls their interaction following the death of Mrs. Barton. Unaware of why her father has returned home so early and so downcast, “Mary sits on a stool at her father’s feet in old childish guise” (89). Where, as a child, she kissed her father’s hand, she now, with more control, “press[es] his hand with silent sympathy” (89). In the earlier scene, however, John responded to Mary’s need. Silent and immovable at first, he was then able to “check his grief” when his child began to cry. Now, “his attitude . . . remain[s] unchanged for more than half-an-hour, his eyes gazing vacantly and fixedly at the fire,” making “no sound but now and then a deep-drawn sigh to break the weary ticking of the clock, and the drip-drop from the roof without” (89). His lifelessness wears on Mary until she can “bear it no longer” and, apparently because any emotion would be better than none, she breaks the news of George Wilson’s death. His response is even worse—“[s]till the
same fixed look of despair, not varied by grief for the dead. ‘Best for him to die,’ he said in a low voice. This was unbearable” (89).

More important than the echo of Mrs. Barton’s death, however, are the parallels Gaskell draws between the Charter and lost children. Most overtly this is achieved when Job shifts the conversation from Barton’s recent trip to London to one he took long ago to bury his only child, Margaret’s mother. Though the story ends up providing comic relief, the implicit comparison between the two misfortunes adds pathos to what middle class readers might otherwise be inclined to view as a minor political disappointment. And this is not the first time Gaskell has tried this tactic. She also makes the connection when she introduces the Chartist element to the novel’s plot:

An idea was no springing up among the operatives, that originated with the Chartists, but which came at last to be cherished as a darling child of many and many a one. They could not believe that government knew of their misery” (77)

When parliament turns away the delegation, they sentence this “darling child” to a premature death. Gaskell primes readers to imaginatively experience the magnitude of working class hope for the Charter by comparing it with the kind of hope commonly associated with children.

Finally, in her discussion of Barton’s decline following the rejection of the Charter, Gaskell includes a brief but telling flashback to the months following the death of Barton’s only son, Tom. Having been blacklisted by the mill owners for his involvement with the trade union, Barton is forced to work through his traumatic experience at London while he is out of work. The hunger Barton can bear, but he loathes the idea of having to give up his home in order to save on rent because it “yet seem[s] hallowed by his wife’s presence” (102). And then we learn something of the circumstances in which the family first took the dwelling:

He had removed to his present house just after the last bad times, when little Tom had sickened and died. He had then thought the bustle of the removal would give his poor
stunned wife something to do, and he had taken more interest in the details of the proceeding than he otherwise would have done, in the hope of calling her forth to action again (102).

One cannot help but make the connection between Barton urging his grieving wife to take interest in fixing up her new home after the death of their only son and Gaskell’s husband encouraging her to write a work of fiction in the same situation. Coming where it does, in the middle of the description of Barton’s physical and mental sufferings during the lean period following the Charter’s rejection, we are again encouraged to see Barton’s situation with a similar degree of tragic poignancy. Unlike Gaskell and his wife, however, Barton does not have a spouse to find him some employment when he is most anxious for it. Even worse, those who do have the power to employ him refuse it.

It is around this point that Barton begins to disappear from the novel. What glimpses we do get of him are, for the most part, unflattering. In a moment of anger he raises his hand at Mary, but for the most part, and what to her mind is worse, he sits silent “near the fire (from habit) smoking, or chewing opium” (105). At other times he lies “late in bed, for what was the use of getting up?” (110). It is only fitting that Barton should be withdrawing from the action of the novel because what Gaskell is trying to depict in her character is a man withdrawing from life itself—withdraw ing into himself. According to Raymond Williams, Gaskell’s sympathy, so attuned to Barton at the beginning of the novel becomes crippled by the “fear of violence which was widespread among the upper and middle classes at the time” (485). Gaskell, I would argue, was indeed afraid of violence, but not of the sort Williams suggests. Gaskell was afraid of the violence we do to ourselves—the kind of psychological violence she knew from personal experience she was capable of doing to herself. It is worth remembering at this point that, according to herself, Gaskell wrote “the greater part of the first volume when [she] was obliged
to lie down constantly on the sofa” (*Letters* 74). We can be sure that with the novel itself being the only thing standing between her and those “painful scenes which would force themselves upon [her] remembrance,” Gaskell had more than her character’s situation in mind when she described the increasingly morbid trajectory of his thoughts (*Letters* 74). From the time that the Charter is rejected, Gaskell portrays Barton in anything but a flattering light, but that does not mean that she portrays him without sympathy. To the contrary, Gaskell’s impassioned description of Barton’s suffering emphasizes the inevitability of his downward trajectory given the inhuman conditions in which he is placed. Indeed, Gaskell makes sure to tell us that the “deep mortification” he feels after the rejection of the charter has “as little selfishness for its cause as mortification had,” and that during the period that follows he cared about want “as little as most men” (149). However, Barton’s “body [takes] its revenge for its uneasy feelings,” and his “mind bec[omes] soured and morose” (149). Most significantly, having lost “its equipoise” and elasticity, his mind “cease[s] to hope,” and as the narrator tells us, “it is hard to live on when one can no longer hope” (149). Gaskell places striking emphasis on the seamlessness between his hungry body and morose mind. The suffering of body and mind trade in morbid reciprocity, so that “bodily privation” and the thoughts—“so haunting, so incessant”—which follow, do equal harm (149). In order to emphasize this mental violence, Gaskell literalizes the metaphoric “thoughts that pressed” into the “painted walls” that, narrowing a little each day as part of a diabolical system of torture, “at last crush the life out of [their victim]” (149). Not in the least fooled by the West’s pervasive assumption of Cartesian duality, Gaskell understands that bodily deprivation is inseparable from one’s emotional and cognitive condition. When face to face with the father of the man he has murdered, John Barton himself describes the seemingly harmless mental activity of resolving a “puzzle” as more agonizing than the tortures of hellfire, more
painful than execution. “I've been sore puzzled here,” Barton remarks. “I would go through hell-fire if I could but get free from sin at last, it's such an awful thing. As for hanging, that's just nought at all” (315). Gaskell shows considerable sympathy with Barton’s efforts to escape this puzzle. Helping her readers understand the perverse logic of opium use and suicidal ideation as not at all perverse to one who has nothing to look forward to, Gaskell dares us: “before you blame too harshly…try a hopeless life” (149). Connecting mental turmoil and the sufferings of the body with phrases such as “diseased thoughts” and “sickliness of dreams,” Gaskell challenges her readers to rethink the very meaning of moral fortitude in situations of extreme want (149). In the final analysis, she portrays Barton’s death as the inescapable telos of a future without work.

In her description of John Barton’s mental and physical abjection, Gaskell explores not only the draw of death that arises from hopelessness without work but also the inescapability of this pull when one has no direction for their energies. After the Charter has been rejected, Barton is a doomed man because he has nothing to work towards. No amount of inward effort, commitment, or resolution can resolve his lack of hope and healing work. Indeed, Barton’s errors, his involvement in the demoniacal trade union, and the murder which he commits at their bidding, are the inevitable result of being denied a sphere of action outside his own mind, i.e., a voice in parliamentary politics.

**Appointed Work**

*I do believe we have all some appointed work to do.*

*(Letters 107)*

Gaskell is in complete agreement with Carlyle when it comes to the healing benefits of having some work to do, and in the story of John Barton she powerfully dramatizes the dangers of
hopelessly “puzzling” through unemployment. With her young hero and heroine, however, Gaskell does something different. Mary, as has already been suggested, is a paragon of activity, and she and Jem often function straightforwardly as exemplars of the healthy benefits of labor, but it is also in their narrative that Gaskell departs most noticeably from Carlyle by putting pressure on the idea of “the duty that lies nearest.”

For Gaskell at least, deciding which duty lies nearest could itself become a source of anti-self-conscious desire for the clarity of death. On the one hand, Gaskell’s correspondence suggests both that she found it helpful in times of perplexity and that she offered it as a consolation to others. Thus in a letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, Gaskell explains that she “brought away one sentence,” from Sartor Resartus, “which does capitally for a reference when I get perplexed sometimes. ‘Do the duty that lies nearest to thee’” (Letters 117). On the other hand, Gaskell’s competing obligations as a popular novelist, as a devoted mother, as wife to a Unitarian minister, and as an active and respected member of her local community created doubt as to which of her many pressing duties lay the nearest at any given time. Indeed, in the very same letter in which she offers this piece of Carlylean wisdom to Kay-Shuttleworth, Gaskell admits that she “often feel[s] in such a mist; and then . . . yearn[s] so for the time when in ‘His light we shall all see light’” (Letters 118). Here we see Gaskell expressing anti-self-conscious desire in the form of longing for the clarifying light of Revelation. Her orthodox death-wish springs not from her lack of employment, but from her doubts about what that employment ought to be.

Gaskell elaborates her eschatological longing in another letter to Eliza Fox, in which she complicates Carlyle’s Gospel of Work and his theory of anti-self-consciousness by suggesting that “cultivating the Individual Life” begins with determining our “appointed work.”
I do believe we have all some appointed work to do, whh [sic] no one else can do so well; Wh. is our work; what we have to do in advancing the Kingdom of God; and that first we must find out what we are sent into the world to do, and define it and make it clear to ourselves, (that’s the hard part) and then forget ourselves in our work, and our work in the End we ought to strive to bring about. (Letters 107)

While Gaskell retains Carlyle’s emphasis on the self-annihilation that occurs when we “forget ourselves in our work,” she also challenges his insistence in Characteristics that we are here “not to ask questions, but to do work.” There is an important point of disagreement between Gaskell’s assertion that “first we must find out what we are sent into the world to do and define it and make it clear to ourselves” and Carlyle’s dictum that we are here “not to ask questions, but to do work” (Characteristics 17). Emphasizing the “appointed” nature of work and identifying the task of identifying that work as “the hard part,” Gaskell makes being “perplexed” (or, like Barton, “puzzled”) a precondition for doing our duty.

In both the above quoted letters to Kay-Shuttleworth and Fox, Gaskell moves from asserting that we all have some duty, to bemoaning the difficulty of identifying that duty, to falling back on her clearly defined duties that have come to her as a result of her marriage. To Kay-Shuttleworth she writes:

I am always glad and thankful to Him that I am a wife and a mother and that I am so happy in the performance of those clear and defined duties; for I think there must be a few years of great difficulty in the life of every woman who foresees and calmly accepts single life. (118)

Whatever other mists may shroud her sense of duty, Gaskell experiences a sense of gratitude when she contemplates the contrast between the doubts that confront her and the even greater uncertainty that presents itself to the woman who accepts a single future. Like John Barton staring down a lifetime without work, here the single woman must puzzle her way toward a future without the obvious labors of a wife and mother.
In the letter to Eliza Fox, however, Gaskell questions whether the duties of a wife and mother are quite so “clear and defined” after all and whether the increasing autonomy of women in English society represents an unambiguous gain. Writing to Fox, Gaskell presents the challenge of identifying one’s proper duty as a distinctly vexing “puzzle” that leads almost inexorably into physical pain:

Yes that discovery of one’s exact work in the world is the puzzle: I never meant to say it was not. I long (weakly) for the old times where right and wrong did not seem such complicated matters; and I am sometimes coward enough to wish that we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women. Only even then I don’t believe William would ever have commanded me. I can understand your nervous headache so well, having just worried myself into a similar state. (109)

Gaskell’s somewhat surprising, and to her mind cowardly, nostalgia for “the old times” when “obedience was the only seen duty of women” may very well contain the memory of the time not so long ago when William—if he didn’t command her—at least selected an employment for her during her grief in the writing of Mary Barton. Perhaps it is because Gaskell was able to take such comfort (and wished she could take more) in the duties ready-appointed by her role as a wife and mother that her novel about labor should also contain a marriage plot.

Earlier we discussed all the times that Mary is able to lift her spirits or at least get through a tough time by busying herself with some small task, but Gaskell also spends considerable space describing the difficult mental and emotional work her characters must go through in order to identify their “appointed duty”—especially in affairs of the heart. In order to be rewarded with the clear duties of matrimony, both Mary and Jem must learn to identify the more obscure duties of single life. The degree to which the lovers have to undergo similar tests and challenges has largely been overlooked. But their parallel trajectory is a crucial run-up to the marriage-plot ending as a transcendent rather than domestic consummation. Many readers have been frustrated
by Mary’s modesty after Jem’s proposal. After all, if she had only run after her lover, so much trouble would have been avoided. Jem would not have punched Carson and would not have been taken up for murder. Mary would never have needed to go to Liverpool or almost died in a delirious fever. However, by structuring parallel plots for her protagonists, Gaskell downplays gender in favor of a wider psychology. Jem and Mary must go through the same motions, must love in vain for a time, must suffer in silence, and must survive their suffering in order to wed.

Jem’s ill-fated, first proposal is “only a preliminary step” (117) to Mary’s discovery of her appointed duty—namely, to fulfill the marriage plot appointed by her creator. When her lover runs out the door, Mary does not suddenly know that she loves him, even though this is often how readers remember the scene. Instead, she is puzzled. If someone had asked, Gaskell tells us, Mary “could not have told at first . . . why she was in such agonized grief. It was too sudden for her to analyze, or to think upon it. She only felt that life would be hereafter blank and dreary” (116). It is not until Mary has “exhausted her body” that she is able to examine what she is feeling, but even then the task is not easy. Having survived the onslaught of raw feeling, “now thoughts [crowd] on her mind” (117). She is at the mercy of her own consciousness. Her conflicting thoughts take on independent life of their own so that she feels “as if two people were arguing the matter,” as if there were a “mournful desponding communion between her former self, and her present self” (117). Slipping into free indirect discourse, Gaskell gives us a taste of the back and forth as an unveiling in anticipation of future joy, a moment of domestic apocalypse:

It had unveiled her heart to her; it had convinced her that she loved Jem above all persons or things. But Jem was a poor mechanic, with a mother and aunt to keep; a mother, too, who had shown her pretty clearly that she did not desire her for a daughter-in-law: while Mr. Carson was rich, and prosperous, and gay, and (she believed) would place her in all circumstances of ease and luxury, where want would never come. What were these hollow vanities to her, now she had discovered how vain, how nothing to her, would be
all gaieties and pomps, all joys and pleasures, unless she might share them with Jem.
(117)

Mary realizes she is in love, then dreads the poverty and harsh tongue of Jane Wilson, and then, as if angry with herself for wavering, denounces her old ways. The language is theatrical, but the dialogue is not just for show. By describing Mary’s a-ha moment as not really a moment at all, but a multi-step process of wrestling the heart and the mind, Gaskell does something else as well—she shows that who we are is the product of an interpretation and a resolution. In a narrative aside, Gaskell asserts that “[a] few moments may change our character for life by giving a totally different direction to our aims and energies” (116-17). The moment can “change our character” because it can change what we perceive as our duty, our “direction.” However, without “our aims and energies,” without, that is, hard work, that change can never be realized.

While Mary is still trying to sort out her conflicting thoughts, she realizes it is time for her father to come home and seeks the privacy of her own room, going so far as to “put out her candle that her father might not see its light under the door” (118). Then, she “s[its] down on her bed to think” (118). Three chapters later, Jem goes to his bedroom in order to “[s]it down on the side of his bed, and think” (147). He does not snuff his candle, but he does push a “heavy chest” against his door lest someone (a burly sailor?) attempt to disturb his thoughts by force. Separated in time and space, the parallel bedroom scenes allow us to see the lovers’ interior states of mind, side by side.

Gaskell depicts Jem’s internal battle as even more puzzled than Mary’s. Where she changes her mind three times (I love Carson—I love Jem—But Jem is poor with a crabby mother—vanitas vanitatum), Jem changes his no fewer than seven times as he moves from understanding why Mary would prefer Carson, to wanting her dead, to feeling sorry for her and wanting Carson dead, to empathizing with Mary’s resulting grief, to taking pleasure in the idea
of her heartbreak, to feeling he would only make matters worse, to contemplating suicide, to remembering that Mary needs him alive to protect her from Carson. Again the language is melodramatic. At one point Jem conjures a grisly image of Mary’s “bright hair all bedabbled with gore,” but the difficulty of recognizing one’s duty and convincing oneself to undertake it comes through loud and clear (147).

Mary and Jem’s mutual, individual, and perplexed progressions toward marriage in these passages reflect how Gaskell adapts Sartor Resartus’s injunction to forget ourselves in our work to her conviction that “discovery of one’s exact work in the world is the puzzle” (Letters 109). Presenting this search for duty as a “puzzle” in her letter to Fox as well as in Mary Barton, Gaskell weds Carlyle’s Gospel of Work to the very discourse of self-consciousness that proves John Barton’s undoing. This affinity between John Barton’s “sore puzzled” state and the discovery of the nearest duty demonstrates the distance Gaskell imagines between marriage and the ultimate ends of a life.

As Gaskell works through the puzzle of Jem’s morbid thoughts, a number of parallels emerge between Diogenes Teufelsdröck’s pilgrimage to anti-self-consciousness and Jem’s response to the information Esther gives him. Like Teufelsdröck’s progress from the Everlasting No, Jem also begins in self-torment, his mind a prey to thoughts and visions that rise unbidden to feed his rage and jealously. His mind works at nothing but negation so that he “refuse[s] to listen to that better voice; or listened only to pervert” (147). Then, Jem passes from the solipsism of negation toward a sense of the duty he bears toward Mary:

But it was too heavy, too grievous to be borne, and live. He would slay himself and the lovers should love on, and the sun shine bright, and he with his burning, woeful heart would be at rest. “Rest that is reserved for the people of God.”

Had he not promised with such earnest purpose of soul, as makes words more solemn than oaths, to save Mary from becoming such as Esther? Should he shrink from the duties of life, into the cowardliness of death? Who would then guard Mary, with her
love and her innocence? Would it not be a goodly thing to serve her, although she loved him not: to be her preserving angel, through the perils of life; and she, unconscious all the while?

He braced up his soul and said to himself, that with God’s help he would be that earthly keeper. (147-48)

Haunted by his obligations to safeguard Mary and “the duties of life,” Jem resolves to do the duty he has newly discovered to be nearest and “with God’s help” in this appointed work be Mary’s “earthly keeper.” Gaskell presents Jem’s awakening sense of duty in decidedly Carlylean language: “And now the mists and the storms seemed clearing away from his path, though it still was full of stinging thorns. Having done the duty nearest to him (of reducing the tumult of his own heart to something like order), the second became more plain before him” (148). This direct allusion to the duty depicted in Sartor Resartus encourages us to read Jem’s noble resolution to look after Mary despite the fact that she loves another as a parallel for Teufelsdröckh’s defiant rejection of the Everlasting No. Finally, “with the resolve to do his duty to the best of his power, peace [comes] into his soul,” and Jem leaves “the windy storm and tempest behind” (148).

If we return to Mary for a moment, we will see that she too, stands up to the Everlasting No and defies its strength over her. After describing Mary’s battle with herself, Gaskell writes, “She had hitherto been walking in grope-light towards a precipice; but in the clear revelation of that past hour she saw her danger, and turned away resolutely and for ever” (117). The twin experiences of Mary and Jem derive allegorical significance through these allusions to Teufelsdröckh’s mystic pilgrimage towards anti-self-consciousness. Gaskell’s invocation of Sartor thus bespeaks an intuition about work’s affinities with the marriage plot. The fact that Gaskell uses Sartor in this way reflects the origins of the work that I have attempted to delineate through my reading of the Carlyles’ correspondence and the romance novel they planned to write together. Thus, Gaskell returns Carlyle’s abstract allegory of anti-self-consciousness to its
amorous beginnings by grounding it in the romantic trials and tribulations of her hero and heroine.

If Gaskell sends both hero and heroine on the same allegorical journey, they certainly seem to wind up at different locations. Jem’s duty, as befits a knight in shining armor, is to protect Mary. Hers, as befits a damsel in distress, is “to do nothing, but strive to be patient, and improve circumstances as they might turn up” with “maidenly modesty” (118). Indeed, Mary’s “unusual wisdom” of resolving not to actively pursue Jem after she rejects his proposal, coupled with her illness following the trial and her domestic bliss at the end of the novel, has lead Zlotnick to argue that “[e]nsnared in an ideology that conflates independence and assertiveness with female sexuality, Gaskell resorts to conservative notions of femininity that enshrine dependence and inactivity in order to save her working-class heroine from the taint of immorality” (87). To resolve Mary’s patience into a conservative gender prescription, however, is to overlook the extent to which patience is presented as hard work—and as work befitting either gender.

When Mary confides her sorrow to Margaret, the latter echoes the former’s previous decision. “You must just wait and be patient,” Margaret counsels. But to her being patient is a very real kind of work. When Mary complains that it is “hard to be patient,” Margaret replies,

Ay, dear; being patient is the hardest work we, any of us, have to do through life, I take it. Waiting is far more difficult that doing. I’ve known that about my sight, and many a one has known it in watching the sick; but it’s one of God’s lessons we all must learn, one way or another. (127)

Margaret’s reference to the sickbed is doubly significant. First, it links Mary’s situation with that of the author, helplessly watching her son die of scarlet fever and, second, it links both Mary and the author to Jem’s similarly described trial of patience when Mary is wrestling through a delirious fever:
And now Jem found the difficulty which every one who has watched by a sick bed knows full well; and which is perhaps more insurmountable to men than it is to women,—the difficulty of being patient, and trying not to expect any visible change for long, long hours of sad monotony. (301)

When read alongside this later scene, Mary’s “unusual wisdom of resolving to do nothing” (118) looks less like a capitulation to bourgeois femininity than part of Gaskell’s painstakingly thorough narrative exploration of just how complicated doing the duty that lies nearest can be.

The Everlasting I Do

Barton, as we have seen, never sorts out the puzzle of his own appointed work. Gaskell does, however, allow him a sliver of consolation, very tellingly, in the form of narrative—the marriage plot. After his distressing encounter with Esther, Barton immediately begins making plans for his daughter’s marriage. Esther’s visitation fills him with anxiety about his daughter’s chastity, and seeing her matured body, as it were, for the first time, he “wish[es] she were not so like her aunt, for the bodily likeness seem[s] to suggest the possibility of a similar likeness in their fate” (113). Here as elsewhere in the novel the narrator pays particularly close attention to the character’s reasoning in times of distress. If Mary and Esther share a physical resemblance, for Barton it stands to reason that they will share a similar fate as well. Believing he knows Mary’s fate, he then looks about for a way to change it. The solution lies ready at hand.

The father now began to wish Mary was married. Then this terrible superstitious fear suggested by her likeness to Esther would be done away with. He felt sure he could not resume the reins he had once slackened. But with a husband it would be different. If Jem Wilson would but marry her. With his character for steadiness and talent!” (113-14)

Barton’s “solution” is double. By protecting Mary from the merciless sexuality of her own body, he also protects himself from the “the terrible superstitious fear” inflicted on him by his own mind. Imagining his daughter’s union with Jem, Barton seizes on the marriage plot, however
briefly, as a way to silence his own morbid thinking. Barton’s solution is appropriate in that parallels the course that the novel itself will follow.

And yet, John Barton remains a hopeless case for, having lost his own wife, he is unable to share in those mutual duties that he begins to narrate. In this respect he differs from his daughter and anticipated son-in-law. Mary and Jem both struggle to identify their appointed work in the aftermath of heartbreak. They then each form tentative plans of action that provide some peace, but little happiness. Finally, the marriage plot steps in to award them with “those clear and defined duties” for which Gaskell expressed her thanks in her correspondence with Kay-Shuttleworth (118). Mary and Jem, recently so unsure, become emphatic about their duty towards one another.

Indeed, knowing one’s appointed duty becomes paramount to having a kind of proprietary interest in carrying it out. Mary’s sense that she must travel to Liverpool and establish Jem’s alibi exemplifies this conflation of duty and privilege. Unable even to articulate her opposition—she dislikes the plan of sending Job on the mission “inexpressibly”—Mary views the task as “her duty, her right” (244). Mary anticipates her exertions on Jem’s behalf as beyond the abilities or motivations of any other:

She durst not trust to any one the completion of her plan: they might not have energy, or perseverance, or desperation enough to follow out the slightest chance; and her love would endow her with all these qualities independently of the terrible alternative which awaited her in case all failed and Jem was condemned. No one could have her motives; and consequently no one could have her sharpened brain, her despairing determination. (224-25)

Going to Liverpool is, to quote Gaskell’s letter to Fox, Mary’s “appointed work” (107). There is no one so well suited as she to this particular task.

Jem mirrors Mary’s sense of duty when he insists that he must go and look after his delirious lover. In response to Margaret’s proposition that she care for the ailing Mary, Jem is
moved to speak out: “To tell truth, Margaret, it’s I that must go, and that for my own sake, not your grandfather’s. I can rest neither by night nor day for thinking on Mary. Whether she lives or dies, I look on her as my wife before God, as surely and solemnly as if we were married. So being, I have the greatest right to look after her, and I cannot yield it.” (295)

There is a considerable degree of overlap between the two scenes. Each begins with the lover’s strong feelings which object to someone else’s plan to work on behalf of the beloved. Mary “dislikes [Job’s] plan inexpressibly” and “Margaret’s proposition” does “not at all agree” with Jem’s “wishes.” Both are also afraid of the alternative to active involvement. Mary feels she “cannot endure the suspense of remaining quiet” (245) and Jem knows that he would not be able to “rest neither by day nor by night.” Most importantly, though, the two lovers who were previously so unsure of what they were to one another now understand their duty to one another as a “right.”

The language recalls John Barton’s response to his daughter when she asks him why, starving, he will not accept town relief. “I don’t want money, child!” Barton exclaims, “D—n their charity and their money! I want work, and it is my right. I want work.” Barton’s claim to the right to work thus anticipates Jem and Mary’s claims on one another at the same time he echoes Carlyle’s assertion in Past and Present: “A fair day’s-wages for a fair day’s-work:’ it is as just a demand as Governed men ever made of Governing. It is the everlasting right of man” (103, 21). In this sense, the rights that Mary and Jem feel toward one another through their mutual recognition of duty underscore the work entailed in carrying out the marriage plot. John Barton can relieve his hopeless unemployment by narrating to himself his daughter’s marriage, but only in Jem and Mary’s departure for Canada does the novel unite work, anti-self-
consciousness, and marriage—the Everlasting Right, the Everlasting Yea, and the Everlasting I Do.

And yet, in *Mary Barton* the marriage plot functions not as a resolution, but as an apocalyptic vision, as an unconsummated hope for a future sense of completeness or perfection. Gaskell’s narrator presents Jem and Mary’s future in Canada as a prospect beyond the scope of the novel itself:

> I see a long low wooden house, with room enough and to spare. The old primeval trees are felled and gone for many a mile around; one alone remains to overshadow the gable-end of the cottage. There is a garden around the dwelling, and far beyond that stretches an orchard. The glory of an Indian summer is over all, making the heart leap at the sight of its gorgeous beauty.

> At the door of the house, looking towards the town, stands Mary, watching the return of her husband from his daily work. (339)

At the threshold of a house just beyond town, on a warm evening just beyond summer, Mary watches Jem’s return from work. Mary’s watch intersects with the narrator’s gaze as each anticipates what the novel presents as a glimpse of an unrealized future.

Gaskell arrives at this pioneering vision after passing through a less optimistic prospect. In her outline for the proposed conclusion of the novel she describes Jem and Mary’s future in considerably less lucid terms:

> Jem & Mary, & his mother, weary & sick of Manches/ =ter, resolved to go to America, & so, sailing along the/ path of the setting sun, they fade from my sight,/ & darkness mantles over their future, & shrouds/ it from my vision. (Sharps 347)

Notwithstanding the apparent differences between Gaskell’s notes and the published work, both endings emphasize a visionary anticipation, an apocalyptic hope for domestic tranquility beyond the setting sun. What’s more, Gaskell’s initial sketch sets in even starker relief the clarity and space of the novel’s closing vision: the gorgeous beauty of the autumn evening, the plenty of the
Canadian homestead, and the unpopulated space that surrounds her characters. It is a vision of what lies just beyond the horizons of the known and the settled, a place where the nearest work appears distinctly in the clear light of a bright autumn evening.
Notes

1 See Deborah Epstein Nord and Hilary Schor
2 Gaskell actually misquotes [Check Buller, too] the Carlyle letter which reads “May you live long to write good Books,—and to do *silently* good actions, which I believe is very much more indispensable.” So and so makes a big deal about this misremembering . . .
3 See Gaskell’s letter to Lady Kay Shuttleworth (Letters 117). Gaskell prefaces her remark with a self-deprecating comment on how she “never cd enter into *Sartor Resartus*”—an assertion as preposterous as her defensive claim in the preface to *Mary Barton*, “I know nothing of Political Economy,” for the novel not only refers to Diogenes Teufelsdröckh by name, but makes repeated allusions to the text that demonstrate both familiarity and understanding of, at the very least, Teufelsdröckh’s journey from the “Everlasting No” to the “Everlasting Yea” (See fn. *Mary Barton* on pages 148).
4 What these readers often forget it that presumably Barton would still have used Jem’s gun and Jem’s mother would presumably still have identified it as her son’s. Jem still would have been tried for murder, he would just be more miserable knowing he was leaving Mary behind heartbroken.
5 Thomas Recchio in his notes on the text in the Norton Critical Edition comments on the similarity, noting too that when Jem a little further on decides to “relinquish all thought of self” in serving Mary, he has accomplished something akin to Teufelsdröckh’s “first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self” (*Mary Barton* 148, *Sartor Resartus* 142).
CHAPTER THREE:

“Leave Sunny Imaginations Hope”:

Anti-Self-Consciousness, Escapist Reading, and Charlotte Brontë’s Shirley and Villette

Shortly after Christmas in 1848, Charlotte Brontë penned a letter to her long-time friend and correspondent, Ellen Nussey, consoling her on the misfortune of entertaining a houseful of unwanted guests. Brontë worries that Nussey will become “ill . . . with over-fatigue” (8), but takes comfort in the belief that the “bustle,” though trying, will ultimately prove beneficial by preventing her chronically low-spirited friend from “sitting still and thinking” (8). It is better, Brontë counsels, “to be fagged with excess of action than to be ennuied with monotonous tranquility—your body may suffer under such circumstances but your mind will not prey upon itself” (8). Brontë’s advice exemplifies her widely recognized commitment to the Victorian virtues of acceptance, resignation, and self-control; however, it also hints at her personal motivations for adhering to these often misunderstood and sometimes vilified practices.

Nowhere in her recommendation of selfless perseverance does Brontë refer, even obliquely, to Nussey’s moral obligations as a woman, Christian, or member of the middle classes. Neither does she suggest that by making the best of an unpleasant situation, Nussey will strengthen her character through self-denial. Sarah Stickney Ellis and her ilk have conditioned us to read Brontë’s advice in this manner, but the similarity between Brontë’s and Ellis’s prescriptions does not mean that they were trying to cure the same internal disease, or even that they would agree on the “cure.” Concerned that Nussey’s mind will “prey upon itself,” Brontë here preaches bodily mortification, not to elevate that organ, but simply to distract it. The only devils she fears for Nussey are uninterrupted introspection and what her contemporaries would call a “morbid self-consciousness.” Living their day to day lives, Nussey and Brontë were less concerned with
virtuous self-making than just surviving the “self” they already had. The wholeness, the
goodness, the weakness of this self were immaterial when faced with the dangers of being left
alone with it.

How to be alone with oneself was, of course, a skill Brontë would be forced to master.
The letter to Nussey provides a small insight into Brontë’s emotions and thoughts during the
nine-month period from September of 1848 to May of 1849 that witnessed the deaths of all three
of her remaining siblings. The advice she gave Nussey for dealing with the small grief of too
much company—to embrace the distractions rather than retreat from them—closely resembles
her own strategy for dealing with the much more serious grief she, herself, was facing. However,
rather than surround herself with the bustle of friends and family, Brontë chose to create a bustle
of characters in her own mind and writing. She wrote almost all of her second novel, Shirley,
during these same nine months, an accomplishment that testifies to the intensity of the grieving
mind’s hunger for distraction. The letters Brontë wrote upon the completion of Shirley to
William Smith Williams and James Taylor, two associates of her publishing company,
emphasize how important the act of writing was in helping her survive this lonely time. To
Williams she writes, “Whatever now becomes of the work—the occupation of writing has been a
boon to me—it took me out of dark and desolate reality to an unreal but happier region” and later,
“The faculty of imagination lifted me when I was sinking three months ago, its active exercise
kept my head above water” (241, 261). To Taylor, she describes writing as an “eager, restless
endeavor to combat mental sufferings scarcely tolerable” (461). Though Shirley does not shy
away from psychological pain (the descriptions of Caroline Helstone’s depression are, on the
contrary, agonizingly honest), the fact remains that Brontë wrote, at least in part, to escape rather
than confront her grief, to prevent herself, perhaps, from “sitting still and thinking.” Referring to
her writing as an “occupation,” an “exercise,” and a “restless endeavor,” Brontë, like Elizabeth Gaskell, stresses fiction’s value as an employment, something which not only diverts the mind, but also puts it to work and keeps it busy—too busy to torment itself.

In the midst of their grief both Brontë and Gaskell found relief by employing themselves in writing a work of fiction, and interestingly enough, both novelists chose to situate their romance plots within the context of working class labor issues (during the Luddite uprisings of 1811-12 and the second Chartist petition to Parliament in 1842, respectively). However, in Shirley, the political plot seems ever waiting in the wings as the central characters work through their romantic difficulties on center stage. Both Gaskell and Brontë saw a parallel between the enforced idleness they experienced as grieving middle-class women and that suffered by the working class during times of economic depression. Where, on the one hand, Gaskell used this sympathetic connection as a starting point for exploring the psychological dimension of the abuse doled out to the working classes by their self-occupied middle-class employers, Brontë on the other, used the more distant context of the Luddite uprisings as a trope only. The threat posed to the heroine’s mental and physical health by her self-indulgent, melancholy idleness finds its echo in the threat posed to Robert Moore’s person and property by the restlessness of the increasingly obsolete textile workers, but an echo is all. Brontë’s primary concern is the morbid self-consciousness of a character whose socioeconomic situation closely resembles her own. In particular, Brontë was interested in how fiction can function as an escape from self-consciousness, as a tool in the practice of the anti-self-consciousness theory of Carlyle.

This chapter argues that in writing Shirley and then again Villette, Brontë wrestled with the characteristically nineteenth-century antagonist, self-consciousness. A practical solution to the insistent demands of grief during their composition, the two novels also provided Brontë with
the experimental materials for exploring both the beneficial and detrimental effects popular narratives of escape and wish-fulfillment could have on reader and writer alike. On the one hand, these comfortingly familiar (though improbable) fictions offered an expedient life-preserver to the individual floundering in self-despairing grief or depression. On the other, these same narratives, in so far as they encouraged identification (and thus self-comparison), might actually strengthen the individual’s tendency towards the very self-reflection he or she was attempting to avoid.

**Escape Artists**

If writing *Shirley* granted Brontë a momentary escape from her grief-stricken mind, it seems reasonable to suggest that the experience also sensitized her to the parallel escapes her fiction offered to her readers. Reviews of *Jane Eyre* frequently commented on the all-absorbing power of that work, which seemed to compel readers both to read it in one sitting and to identify with a sympathetic protagonist. To judge from these notices, reading *Jane Eyre* into all hours of the night was the most commonplace of experiences, as recorded by Queen Victoria herself. Perhaps it does no harm to repeat W. G. Clark’s delightful reflection that, reading *Jane Eyre* on a wintery night, “we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr. Rochester about four in the morning” (qtd. in Gettelman 578). By the time she began her second novel, Brontë was undoubtedly aware that her fiction, possibly even more than most, was highly immersive, offering her readers a world in which to lose themselves if they chose. Writing to escape the horrors of her own mind, Brontë also abetted countless readerly attempts at escape.
Some account of escapist reading\(^2\), which I define loosely as reading in preference to some other perceived or actual reality, cannot be omitted from any history of the novel\(^3\). Historians and theorists of the genre typically reserve a nod for escapism, and a handful of critics have deemed it a suitable subject for major historical or sociological study. These scholars, however, rarely consider whether and how our awareness of widespread escapist reading should affect our own critical and interpretive practices. An exception is occasionally to be found in projects inspired by feminist or cultural studies, where the shared interest in expanding the canon and legitimating popular modes of expression has led a few scholars to analyze how popular fiction creates and sustains escapist fantasies\(^4\), but canonical fiction is hardly ever treated. I am inclined to suggest that investigating escapism only in the case of popular fiction is a dubious practice at any period. However, the practice must be doubly suspect for the Victorian era when only a blurry line divided high and low literatures, and even acknowledged works of genius relied on a heavily plotted narrative form unabashedly aimed at catching and maintaining reader interest\(^5\).

The recent interest in cognitive science, especially the study of attention and absorption, has begun to redress this error. Giving escapism a scientific flare has perhaps eased lingering anxieties about its academic legitimacy. Stephen Arata, Jonathan Crary, Lisa Brocklebank, Debra Gettelman, and Nicholas Dames have all treated reading practices and states of mind which could be classified, at least partially, as escapist. Dames’s meticulously researched *Physiology of the Novel* has been especially important in this context because of the convincing argument he makes for the historical authenticity of approaching Victorian fiction from such a cognitive/reader-based perspective. Working with the writing of novelists, their contemporary critics, and reviewers, Dames argues that the nineteenth-century had a theory of the novel and
that theory was primarily interested in the *experiential* qualities of reading. How did a novel make the reader feel? Did it rouse the emotions? Did it excite the brain?

Most critical studies assume, consciously or not, a reader interested in information: theme, character, structure, the meaning of life, historical change, social power, etc. Working off of the evidence provided by critics like Dames, this project begins by assuming a reader interested less in gaining knowledge, than in achieving a certain pleasurable experience of absorption. I differ from Dames, however, in that I classify such absorptive states as, almost necessarily, a form of escape\(^6\). In the pages that follow, I consider how novels and novelists deal with our desire to escape and, in so doing, I attempt to show that this practice, often dismissed in phrases like “mere escapism,” is much deeper, broader, more diverse, and pervasive than we might at first suspect. If some Victorian authors, like Charlotte Brontë, wrote in a quasi-escapist mode, even more were writing for an audience they fully expected (whether they found such an expectation desirable or not) to be searching for a hyper-engaged, out-of-body, a.k.a, escapist reading experience. Surely, then, the formal and generic evolution of novels records continual adaptations for managing escapism in a positive or negative manner. I try to identify some of the ways Victorian novels engage with escapist readers in order to understand how escapist reading might affect some of our most accepted interpretations of these works. By acknowledging the distance that lies between the reading experience and the critical reading, I hope to forge a fruitful union between the two.

In this chapter, I trace Brontë’s evolving treatment of escapism in *Shirley* and *Villette*, especially in regard to escaping painful self-consciousness and rumination, mental experiences which were deeply troubling for Brontë after the loss of her siblings. Considering Brontë’s familiar self-abnegation and its Victorian cultural context from this “escapist” angle, I hope to
revise our basic understanding of how these ideological practices functioned (both in and out of the novel) in a project of self-making. Though this discourse can be found throughout the Victorian era, I argue that there is another, often neglected narrative that cares less about the nature of the self than about its survival. Rather than seeking to solidify, strengthen, or punish the self, some Victorians turned to the cultural recommendations of self-control and abnegation in order to diminish a painful awareness of that self’s very existence. Specifically, as concerns Brontë and her readers, some Victorians found this relief in reading fiction, controlling and diminishing themselves by subordinating their consciousness to narrating voices, absorbing their minds with satisfying plots, and protecting themselves against an invidious self-consciousness with the convenient strength of diegetic boundaries.

Brontë and Distraction

Brontë and Nussey were able to combat rumination with mental employment because of the finite scope of consciousness. What we are aware of at any given moment is determined, to some extent, simply by the fact that our attention capacity is limited, so limited that researchers in this area estimate that even if there were nothing else to distract us, we could still attend to only about 0.3% of the information exchanged in a typical face to face conversation (Csíkszentmihályi 18). Clearly, there is a lot we miss, but when we are grieving or hounded by self-defeating rumination, the finitude of our conscious purview becomes one of our greatest allies. Brontë’s inchoate but discerning cognitive theory of escapism proposes that an individual can survive the onslaught of his or her most painful thoughts by forcing or enticing the mind to expend its limited focus on something else. Rather than fly, the escapist must fill, fill the mind with distractions in hopes that the self and all its troubles simply won’t fit there anymore.
Brontë’s cognitive model of the mind as a container of pre-determined size that permits the possessor to hear or see only one thing at a time reappears throughout her fiction. In *The Professor*, Crimsworth describes his mind as a “four-walled cell where are stored for me the records of the past” (46). With no possibility of adding another wall or another room, Crimsworth’s metaphor seems, at first, to highlight the suffocating inescapability of the past. However, because each of these walls is imagined as displaying just one picture, Crimsworth also hints at the structural limitation by which we may control those troubling memories. Only one picture may be viewed (or related) at a time. Focusing our attention on one scene, we cannot view the other three. Choosing to show us the Belgium “picture,” Crimsworth emphasizes the power of exclusion inherent in this decision. Belgium is the third picture, he tells us, and, “As to the fourth, a curtain covers it, which I may hereafter withdraw, or may not, as suits my convenience and capacity” (46). However, it is in *Shirley*, the novel Brontë wrote as a distraction, that understanding and manipulating the limitations of the mind become a crucial part of the novel’s narrative—at least for that most lovelorn of heroines, Caroline Helstone.

I. *Shirley*

A heroine in a double courtship plot, Caroline follows a trajectory from single girl to married woman, but growing up for Caroline also involves discovering the “confines of illusive, void dreams” (19) and journeying from “Elf-land” to “the shores of Reality” (19). While the marriage plot works itself out around her (Robert proposes to Shirley, Shirley refuses, Robert realizes whom he really loves), Caroline sets to work on her private plot of learning how to live outside her imagination. Ironically, “Elf-land” and “Reality” turn out, in the end, to be one and the same, i.e., married life with Robert. We will consider the implications of this overlap later on in the chapter. For now it is enough to say that Caroline’s central trial throughout most of the
The novel is mastering a kind of personal mind control in order that she may put away childish things and make room for the reality of womanhood.

The challenge proves formidable. Often isolated, Caroline finds it extremely difficult to focus on anything outside of her own mind. Not long after realizing Robert’s disaffection, for instance, she finds herself alone in her silent chamber, the physical space and emblem of Brontë’s cognitive model, while her Uncle is spending the evening with the curate:

Closeted there, silent and solitary, what could she do but think? . . . the current of reflection ran rapidly through her mind: to-night she was mutely excited.

Mute was the room,—mute the house . . . the servants were quiet in the kitchen, engaged with the books their young mistress had lent them; books which she had told them were “fit for Sunday reading.” And she herself had another of the same sort open on the table, but she could not read it: its theology was incomprehensible to her, and her own mind was too busy, teeming, wandering, to listen to the language of another mind.

Then, too, her imagination was full of pictures; images of Moore; scenes where he and she had been together; winter fireside sketches; a glowing landscape of a hot summer afternoon passed with him in the bosom of Nunnely wood . . . But these joys being hollow, were, ereelong, crushed in: the pictures faded, the voice failed, the visionary clasp melted chill from her hand, and where the warm seal of lips had made impress on her forehead, it felt now as if a sleety rain-drop had fallen. She returned from an enchanted region to the real world: for Nunnely wood in June, she saw her narrow chamber . . . and for Moore’s manly companionship, she had the thin illusion of her own dim shadow on the wall. (167-68)

Without any voices to listen to in the mute room, the mute house, Caroline is left defenseless against her inner monologue. The quiet emptiness outside Caroline is contrasted with her bustling inner world. Her mind is a chaotic confusion of “busy, teeming, wandering” thoughts and “her imagination [is] full of pictures.” Listed in a lengthy series and here dotted out for convenience, these pictures fill the paragraph that contains them, relegating any awareness of Caroline’s present reality to the silent corners of her (and the reader’s) minds.

But if Caroline’s illusions allow her to forget, momentarily, Robert’s indifference, they similarly prevent her from focusing on other, less personal occupations that might enable her to take her mind off Robert altogether. She cannot, like the servants downstairs, concentrate on a
book of theology. Her mind is too full of itself to “listen to the language of another mind.” Both real life and the book that offers a Sunday’s rest from it are crowded out by her fantasies. Though Caroline does return from the “enchanted region to the real world,” it is not by her own conscious effort. We are told that the daydreams “being hollow, were, erelong, crushed in,” allowing “her narrow chamber” and “her dim shadow” to rush into the void created by her punctured dreams.

I have proposed that Brontë was interested in our ability to escape a painful self-awareness by filling the mind and occupying it with thoughts and fictions unconnected to our immediate lives. At first, it might seem that in Caroline, Brontë presents us with the same problem in reverse. After all, temporarily escaping reality seems to pose few problems for the dreary heroine. And yet, the content of Caroline’s “escapist” daydreams is continuous with that of her withering ruminations. In neither state is she able to evade the topic which alternately wrecks and raises her—Robert. Caroline’s fantasies, in other words, do not provide the kind of self-escape practiced by Nussey and Brontë. Whereas these women focused on company and writing, respectively, to ward off self-consuming thoughts, Caroline uses her imagination to re-animate and sustain the very desire that, unfulfilled, torments her. Not completely distinguishable, the one blending seamlessly into the other, rumination and imagination are also co-dependent. Her hollow dreams create the idle, vacant condition in which rumination thrives. Similarly, when Caroline tries to concentrate on the reality of her relationship with Robert, her line of thought leads, almost inevitably, to desire and imaginary wish-fulfillment. Only two paragraphs before the daydreams excerpted above, Caroline’s “earnest wish [is] to see things as they were, and not be romantic” (167), and her truth-seeking meditation on Robert’s “feelings,
on his life, on his fears, on his fate” (166), and the “mystery of “business”” (167) is cut short by his distracting physical body. As he stands up to leave the church, Caroline begins to wonder:

Will he turn his head towards this pew?—no—not once—he has not one look for me: that is hard; a kind glance would have made me happy till to-morrow: I have not got it; he would not give it; he is gone. Strange that grief should now almost choke me, because another human being’s eye has failed to greet mine. (167)

Caroline is incapable of thinking about Moore without thinking about herself and her misfortunes, and, in the end, both her self-pitying thoughts and the fantasies they encourage ensure her unhappiness. Brontë, I argue, points to the self-centeredness of both these activities. In his explanation of the “anti-self-consciousness theory of Carlyle,” John Stuart Mill wrote that our only chance for happiness is to “treat, not happiness, but some end external to it, as the purpose of life” (117). The practice of anti-self-consciousness requires that the individual focus on some object beyond the self and avoid tying that object back to the well-being or happiness of the same. Caroline may be fixated on a person external to herself, but only in so far as his actions will or will not make her happy. Rumination and imagination form a cyclical relationship, and the center on which the whole cycle turns is the self.

Caroline’s inability to focus on “some end external” to her happiness with Robert has serious consequences. The self-cannibalism of the mind that preys upon itself, to return to Brontë’s phrase from the letter to Nussey, expresses itself physically on Caroline’s wasting body. The most striking feature of Caroline’s daydream is undoubtedly its physicality, especially considering its Victorian audience. By accentuating the tangible qualities of Caroline’s dream world, Brontë denotes the degree to which Caroline’s bodily self shares in her out-of-body experiences. When Caroline wakes from her daydream, for instance, we are told that the sweaty “clasp” (168) of Moore’s hand “melted chill” (168) from her own. The exact spot on her forehead which felt the “warm seal of lips” (168) experiences “a sleety rain-drop” (168). The
reader cannot but share, perhaps with discomfort and embarrassment, the sensations of
Caroline’s self-pleasuring fantasy and its come down. Physical and emotional self-consciousness
define her abstracted state. She feels and watches Robert touch her body just as, in the church,
she feels and watches their failure to connect. Escapist as Caroline’s fantasies may be, they do
not allow her to escape herself, and far from preventing her from preying on her mind, they are
complicit in her mental deterioration. Coming out of her dream, Caroline has instead of
“Moore’s manly companionship . . . the thin illusion of her own dim shadow on the wall” (168). Moore’s companionship resolves into her own shadow, offering further evidence that Caroline’s
daydreams are entirely self-centered. She is not actually dreaming of Moore at all, but of a
projection of Moore formed from her own reflected feelings. He is, in other words, only a
shadow of herself. Turning from this double shadow, Caroline drops into a reverie and feels that
“inaction [will] suit the frame of mind into which she is now declining” (168). This “frame of
mind,” we are no longer surprised to find, is a ruminating one, in which she asks herself such
uplifting questions as “What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and
the grave?” (168). In so far as Caroline’s daydreams create the conditions favorable for such
unpleasant speculations, they are complicit in her mental and physical deterioration. Caroline, in
fact, is becoming a “dim shadow” of her former self.

Buoying herself up with a fragile illusion, Caroline seems to share physically in the crush
of reality. Indeed, an exhausted melancholy typically rounds out Caroline’s unruly fantasies.
Later, coming out of a similar dream of herself and Robert happy together, she finds that “The
shape that, seen in a moonbeam, lived, had a pulse, had movement, wore health’s glow and
youth’s freshness, turned cold and ghostly grey, confronted with the red of sunrise. It wasted.
She was left solitary at last: she crept to her couch, chill and dejected” (244-45). While the
wasting shape certainly refers to the disappearing vision of Robert Moore, it, again, also describes the form which conjured that fetching fetch. While promising “health’s glow and youth’s freshness,” the daydream preys upon Caroline’s mind, eating away at the self she cannot leave behind, until she, too, threatens to become “cold and ghostly grey.” Caroline wastes away, pushed to death’s door by the dizzying involutions of introspection and fantasy.

It is tempting to read Caroline’s struggle with morbid self-consciousness as primarily a struggle against Victorian middle-class femininity, but to do so is merely to re-inscribe her within those very confines by denying her legitimacy as an embodiment of one of the most crucial epistemological questions of her time—crucial for Romantic art and Victorian morality alike. In other words, by insisting that Brontë presents Caroline’s narrative of morbidity as a critique of nineteenth century gender systems, critics like Miriam Balin, Susan Gubar, Diedre Lashgari, Sally Shuttleworth, Beth Torgerson, and Athena Vrettos all, to a greater or lesser degree, unintentionally ensure that Caroline will be read as a woman, as if this categorical membership provided a sufficient framework for understanding her entire self. Of course, there is no denying that Caroline’s toxic habit of rumination is part of Shirley’s explicit defamation of compulsory idleness and the injury it inflicts on the lives of middle class women. Caroline is aware that it is, in part, his manly interest in mill and profit margin that ensures Robert’s freedom from the enervating passions that beset her. In language that invokes Brontë’s model of the mind as a finite space, Caroline despairs:

Different, indeed . . . is Robert’s mental condition to mine: I think only of him; he has no room, no leisure to think of me. The feeling called love is and has been for two years the predominant emotion of my heart; always there, always awake, always astir: quite other feelings absorb his reflections, and govern his faculties. (166)
Robert, in his relentless pursuit of his own interests, often strikes the reader as incorrigibly selfish and unreflective, but it is his pursuit, in so far as it keeps him eternally occupied “absorb[ing] his reflections, and govern[ing] his faculties,” that prevents Robert from looking inward and coming to the uncomfortable realization that he is, in fact, an ass. In order to keep his mind from preying upon itself, Robert needs neither lively company nor a good book; he needs only his manly work. Brontë, it would seem, is not satisfied by either gendered occupation, the selfish or the selfless, and I would argue that what at first may seem like a relatively straightforward argument for expanding occupational options for women is actually part of a larger, not immediately gendered, debate about conscious experience and self-knowledge that cuts to the heart of nineteenth-century ethics and, as we will see, the experience of the novel.

Caroline has often been a disappointing heroine for critics who gag on her self-defeating adoration of Robert and her willingness to die because he does not return her love. However, to her own question, “Does virtue lie in abnegation of self?” (169), Caroline answers, “I do not believe it” (169). Indeed, it is precisely because she refuses to abnegate herself and, following the example of the sweet old maid, Miss Ainley, devote her life to helping others that Caroline spends so much time ruminating over her troubles and drifting off into love dreams. If Caroline almost commits suicide by thinking and dreaming about her real and imagined self, the culprit is to be found not in her self-neglect, but, oddly enough, in her inability to let that self go. In a word, Caroline’s problem is that she is always self-conscious, a problem particularly difficult for middle class women, but one they, nevertheless, shared with the biggest thinkers of their time. Far from being the redundant woman, driven to death’s door by her repressed sexuality, Caroline is a representative of the moderns in general, but particularly the Victorian, overcome by the condition of self-consciousness.
**Styles of Reading, Styles of Escape**

In writing *Shirley*, Brontë was participating in the same nineteenth-century conversation about morbid self-consciousness to which Carlyle and Mill were such major contributors. Brontë’s unique contribution to this conversation, I would argue, was to retool Carlyle’s theory of anti-self-consciousness as a theory of escapist reading. The escapism of Caroline’s daydreams is clearly not that prescribed by Brontë to herself and her friends. It does not prevent the mind from preying upon itself, and it does not promote survival. Instead it focuses on the self, encouraging rather than hindering rumination and other states of morbid self-consciousness. Perhaps the question we should be asking ourselves is whether Caroline’s daydreams provide her with the same kind of escape offered by Brontë’s *novels*. After all, of what do Caroline’s dreams consist if not a marriage plot, the same marriage plot (that of herself and Robert) that occupies the absorbed reader’s mind? During these dreams, she and the reader are, to some extent, reading together. Is the reader, then, similarly enervated by his or her personal involvement in the nuptial plotting?

The many similarities between the descriptions of Caroline’s daydreaming and those of a reader reading favor this vision of a shared, trans-diegetic reading experience. As I will discuss in a moment, the language used to describe Caroline’s awakening out of her daydreams translates easily into a portrayal of a reader unpleasantly recalled from a good book. In “return[ing] from an enchanted region to the real world,” Caroline could, like Brontë, be returning from “an unreal but happier region [the world of *Shirley*] to “dark and desolate reality.” Nevertheless, unlike Brontë’s experience of writing *Shirley*, Caroline’s daydreaming, as well as the analogous form of reading it suggests, is defined primarily by its heavy self-investment. Brontë would have expected her readers to seek such an experience in her second novel,
especially following the reception of *Jane Eyre* (and readers like Clark who found themselves “marrying” Mr. Rochester), but she desired a more aloof readership. Writing *Villette*, she expressed her intention that Lucy Snowe “should not occupy the pedestal to which ‘Jane Eyre’ was raised by some *injudicious* admirers” (137, italics mine), and before that, she had promised that the opening pages of *Shirley* would be “something unromantic as Monday morning” (5).

Perhaps Brontë’s wariness about identification led her to contrast Caroline’s heavily self-involved, identificatory “reading” with that of the servants, who quietly read “books fit for Sunday reading,” downstairs. Though she has selected this devotional reading material, Caroline is unable to read the work lying on the table in front of her. Her daydreams are held accountable: “she could not read it: its theology was incomprehensible to her, and her own mind was too busy, teeming, wandering, to listen to the language of another mind” (166). Unlike the servants, Caroline cannot “listen to the language of another mind.” Her passions and her desires are too much in control of her mind for it to “serve” as the conduit for any story but her own, or perhaps one which she could bend to her purposes. In the narrator’s almost contemptuous scare-quoting of ‘fit for Sunday reading,’ lurks a snide suggestion that some other kind of reading, some other “theology” (a romance, the marriage plot, perhaps?), would prove less “incomprehensible,” would be more successful at absorbing her self-centered attention.

Not having a novel like *Jane Eyre* close at hand, Caroline invents her own romance, and the reader, I would suggest, is given the opportunity to observe and even choose between two different styles of reading. Garrett Stewart has proposed that Victorian novels abound in figurations of reading, scenes (such as these two) which can be understood in terms of the plot but also as metaphors for the reading experience. Through these scenes of reading (and through direct address), Stewart argues that the reader is “conscripted” (8), written into the narration as a
generic representative of the masses and required to recognize him or herself in the same impersonal endearments and representations as others. I disagree that such figurations conscript readers; at least, they don’t seem to in Shirley. Rather, I would argue that they offer one possible “style” of reading. The Sunday style may seem somewhat dull, but the intensity of the identificatory style hardly appears untarnished. Ultimately, Caroline’s daydream reminds the reader that if we choose to feel the “visionary clasp” of Robert’s hand on our fingers and the “warm seal of lips” pressed upon our foreheads, we enjoy this pleasure at our own peril, for while Robert’s hand, just a dream for Caroline in chapter ten, will be offered to her as a diegetic reality in chapter thirty-seven, it will never be able to reach us, the reader, anywhere but in our imaginations. No matter how much of ourselves we put into the vision, we will always be left with nothing but our “dim shadow.” By focusing on the painful let down which follows vivid dreams, Brontë gives us a timely reminder of what awaits us at the close of the novel if we choose to read ourselves, as Clark did, into the marriage plot.

The emphasis on the necessary but painful withdrawal following imaginative projections of the self typifies the treatment of daydreams in Shirley, as we can see by comparing the previous passage with this later depiction of Caroline’s dream-life, quoted in part earlier:

When she returned to her chamber, it was to meet the memory of Robert. Slumber’s visitation was long averted . . . she was with Moore, in spirit, the whole time: she was at his side: she heard his voice: she gave her hand into his hand; it rested warm in his fingers. When the church-clock struck, when any other sound stirred . . . she looked up, recalled momentarily to the real. Then she said half aloud, as if deprecating the accusation of some unseen and unheard monitor;—

"I am not cherishing love-dreams: I am only thinking because I cannot sleep: of course, I know he will marry Shirley."

With returning silence . . . she still resumed her dream, nestling to the vision’s side,—listening to, conversing with it. It paled at last: as dawn approached . . . The tale full of fire, quick with interest, borne away by the morning wind, became a vague murmur. The shape that, seen in a moonbeam, lived, had a pulse, had movement, wore health’s glow and youth’s freshness, turned cold and ghostly grey, confronted with the
This passage, discussed earlier for its implications concerning the self-conscious rather than self-escapist nature of Caroline’s fantasy, is an even more powerful evocation of a reader’s experience than was her “mute” room reverie (167-68). Now, “Return[ing] to her chamber . . . to meet the memory of Robert,” Caroline eagerly anticipates picking up her memory where she has left it. She may as well be hurrying back to a good book which captivates her interest more than the daily life she lives between chapters. The occupation of her imagination is referred to as a “tale,” the excitement of which keeps her from laying it aside and falling asleep, and the distractions which cause Caroline not simply to come out of her dream, but to “[look] up” as if from a book, “recall[ing her] momentarily to the real,” resemble the sounds which often drown out the reader’s inner monologue. Finally, Caroline’s guilty acknowledgement, “I know he will marry Shirley,” is something like our eventual awareness that Robert, of course, will marry Caroline, not us. Both admissions are simply immaterial to the longing to dream or read. Even if we are “left solitary at last,” we still sometimes yearn to converse with a shadowy companion.

Brontë’s descriptions of Caroline’s self-conscious, marriage-plotting daydreams parallel a certain self-invested form of reading and emphasize the wasting withdrawal which inevitably follows both forms of imaginary wish-fulfillment. This unusual amalgam of dreaming, self-consciousness, wish-fulfillment, withdrawal, enervation, and reading allows Brontë to critique a certain form of escapist reading, a kind of reading which resembles, in many ways, wish-fulfilling daydreams. However, we do not need to rely entirely on these “figurations” of reading in order to identify Caroline’s reading style, for a very pointed discussion of it arises from an unexpected quarter. The onset of Caroline’s illness is attributed to a “sweet, poisoned breeze, redolent of honey-dew and miasma” (393), which “pass[ing] into her lungs and veins, and
finding there already a fever of mental excitement, and a languor of long conflict and habitual sadness . . . fanned a spark to flame, and left a well-lit fire behind it” (393). In other words, Caroline is ultimately susceptible to the fever only because she has already been weakened by her self-consuming passion for Robert and the unhealthy pattern of rumination and daydreaming which sustains it. It is no coincidence, then, that Caroline’s fateful walk home across the moors follows an actual scene of reading, a scene in which Caroline reveals the intensely personal nature of her reading habits while falling victim to Mrs. Yorke’s vituperative character analysis. Significantly, the sour matron’s main complaint focuses on Caroline’s reading practices. She calls Caroline out for being a “bookish, romancing chit of a girl . . . who hardly ever puts her nose over her uncle, the parson’s, garden-wall” (382), a girl who has “with all these romantic ideas . . . managed to train [her] features into an habitually lackadaisical expression, better suited to a novel-heroine than to a woman who is to make her way in the world, by dint of common sense” (380). The logic is simple enough. Caroline reads marriage plots. Therefore, she “plot[s] to win a husband” (381). Mrs. Yorke makes explicit the connection between Caroline’s daydreams and the self-invested reading practice commonly ascribed to consumers of romance novels.

The irony of Mrs. Yorke’s attack, however, is that while these comments are being made, her own daughter, Rose, has her nose stuck in “a romance of Mrs. Radcliffe’s—The Italian” (376), and the coincidence provides Brontë with the opportunity to begin comparing types of readerly investment. At first, the reader’s engagement is equated with a kind of personal integrity. When Caroline first enters the room, she “[steals] a quiet gaze towards [Rose], dwelling on her young, absorbed countenance, and observing a certain unconscious movement of the mouth as she read—a movement full of character” (376). It is not Rose’s choice or even occupation of
reading that singles her out as a girl of “character,” but the un-self-conscious manner in which she reads. She is wholly absorbed in the story, so absorbed that she has lost all awareness of herself—at least, her physical self. What we cannot tell is whether or not Rose is aware of herself in the story, at least at present. Caroline begins reading over Rose’s shoulder, identifying strongly with the young romance reader whose occupation reminds her how she, too, was “wonderfully taken” by the novel “as a child” (376), when “it seemed to open with such promise” (376). Never one for bubbling enthusiasm, however, Caroline soon laments that the novel ends in “disappointment, vanity, and vexation of spirit” (378), or at least she “thought so when [she] read it” (378). Perhaps Caroline’s memory has been clouded by her recent misfortunes, but, in any event, we must call her pessimistic qualification odd. First of all, the last chapter of The Italian satisfies all our hopes for the two protagonists with a lavish post-nuptial fête, and if this were not strange enough considering Caroline’s gloomy book report, the novel’s last line is:

'O! giorno felice! O! giorno felice!' repeated Paulo, as he bounded forward to mingle in the dance, and ‘O! giorno felice!’ was again shouted in chorus by his joyful companions. (478)

How could Caroline find this ending disappointing, vexatious, and vain? Her peculiarly self-invested reading style provides the answer. Indeed, Caroline’s problem is that she was too “wonderfully taken” (378) with the romance of The Italian when she was a child, just as she is too wonderfully taken with her romantic daydreams of Robert as a young woman. In both cases, Caroline puts so much of herself into the fantasies and the “promise” for personal happiness with which they open, that the ending and necessary return to reality is perforce cruel and painful. The day she finishes The Italian and comes out of her dream is not, for Caroline, as it is for Paulo, Elena, and Vivaldi an occasion to shout, “O happy day.” She cannot mingle in the dance or
marry the hero, but must turn back on herself, disappointed, vexed, and only too aware of the vanity of her dreams.

Rose’s vague awareness that Caroline is not a suitable model for good reading provides an incipient critique of Caroline’s reading style, and, through her character, Brontë begins to grapple with the problem of how to read responsibly. In discussing her own experience of reading *The Italian*, Rose compares her dreams with those of Caroline, showing how the latter, by failing to better her life beyond the confines of her imagination, sets herself up for disappointment and, ultimately, death. Reading *The Italian* also affects Rose with a sense of promise, but it is a promise not dependent on the outcome of the novel. Reading makes Rose “long to travel” (376) in her extra-diegetic reality. She declares:

I cannot live always in Briarfield. The whole world is not very large compared with creation: I must see the outside of our own round planet at least. . . . I am resolved that my life shall be a life: not a black trance like the toad’s buried in marble; nor a long, slow death like yours in Briarfield Rectory. (377)

Though Rose does read herself into the text insofar as she feels herself “far away from England—really in Italy,” she also looks beyond it, planning her extra-diegetic life in the real world as she reads. Though absorbed, she is not in the same “black trance” as Caroline. Her life continues to “be a life,” not a daydream which fossilizes the reader in the moment of the wish, never to move beyond, to grow, and change. Rose declares, along with Mill, that the key to happiness is to “have an object in view” (*Shirley* 377) and to experience change:

‘Is change necessary to happiness?’ [asks Caroline]
‘Yes,’ [replies Rose]
‘Is it synonymous with it?’
‘I don’t know; but I feel monotony and death to be almost the same.’ (377)

Brontë does not fully develop the alternative reading style offered by Rose in *Shirley*, and we may suppose that she was still struggling to imagine a reading relationship with the novel besides
self-conscious identification. It is clear enough, however, that Rose’s experience of herself while reading is not synonymous with that of the heroine. Reading offers the former a hint of change in an otherwise unvaried existence. While reading takes Rose to Brontë’s “unreal, but happier region,” it encourages her to effect such changes as will realize genuine happiness, or at least a reasonable approach to it. Rather than desire to live the fictional plot (travel to the fictional landscapes, marry the fictional hero), Rose desires to put down the book, living separate from, but inspired by it. Two years after this scene, Rose is “far from England . . . a lonely emigrant in some region of the southern hemisphere” (145). She is a far cry from the “romancing chit of a girl . . . who hardly ever puts her nose over her uncle, the parson’s, garden-wall” (382). Either through imagined or real travel, Rose refuses to let her mind stagnate, as Caroline’s does, in the involutions of her own self-conscious desires and disappointments. To do so, and to read in a manner which reinforces such stasis, is, Brontë suggests, to commit a kind of suicide, and Rose’s classification of Caroline’s life as a “black trance” and a “slow death” is eerily prophetic. As previously mentioned, it is on Caroline’s walk home from this encounter with Rose and her mother that she catches the almost fatal fever. By planting this prophecy within a discussion of reading, Brontë powerfully connects the identificatory consumption of literature with other states of morbid self-consumption, the mind preying upon itself. A certain style of reading, a style which Shirley’s reader may be engaged in, is thus connected with Caroline’s illness. The novel asks its reader, is this where these pages are leading you?

I have been arguing that Brontë was wary of readerly forms of identification because of their tendency to promote the suspect sisterhood—morbid self-consciousness and rumination. However, Brontë was far from deserting “passion, and stimulus, and melodrama” (5) in favor of fiction “as unromantic as Monday morning.” Rather, in Shirley, Brontë both critiques one style
of reading and begins, if she does not succeed, to imagine a new way of reading, and being, which leaves us our romances and marriages but changes our relationship to them, which, in a word, allows us to experience these absorbing fictions un-self-consciously and as being about (as, indeed, they are about) other people. Rather than feeding the self, this style of reading helps us escape it.

**Victorian Anti-Self-Consciousness: Harmony in Three Steps**

In *Characteristics*, Carlyle suggested that self-consciousness was both symptom and cure. It certainly isn’t for Caroline Helstone. She fails to find peace either through introspection and self-understanding or through escapist reading. Caroline survives only because the novel capitulates and gives her the man she has been pining for (and, incidentally, the mother she never thought she had). Things start to look up immediately. Now, Caroline can distract herself from her soul-withering introspective habit by deliberately projecting her energy outward onto her mother/friend and husband. Her mental involutions never lead to an epiphany of her true identity. They do not make her worthy of her family and friends. They do nothing but silently kill. No mysteries of the self are solved. Self-consciousness is not the cure; seeing hope in a life outside herself, Caroline simply bails on self-discovery at the critical moment between life and death.

Like *Mary Barton*, *Shirley* seems more in dialogue with the anti-self-consciousness theory of *Sartor Resartus* than of *Characteristics*. “*Characteristics*” stops short of describing how the modern plague of self-consciousness can be cured, especially if it is both the symptom and the cure, but *Sartor* forges ahead, blazing a three step path to a decidedly Victorian recovery. Directly responding to Romanticism’s glorification of the intensely self-absorbed artist, *Sartor Resartus* tells the story of a mock romantic hero, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, in the style of
Goethe’s Werther. Both of these characters (like Caroline) fall into a deep hyper-self-reflective melancholy after being crossed in love. However, unlike Werther, Teufelsdröckh manages to come out of his depressed state of self-absorption in a three step process that involves a complete denial of self, a denial which makes the idealized state of anti-self-consciousness possible.

It is my argument throughout this project that the marriage plot narrates a personal journey similar to that of Teufelsdröckh. Both recount a quest for outward-looking, selfless intimacy, but where Teufelsdröckh finds this intimacy in his relationship with God, the marriage plot finds it in romantic love, the Everlasting I Do. It is no coincidence that Caroline’s narrative of morbid self-consciousness, fever, and life affirming renewal maps so closely onto the journey of Teufelsdröckh. Like Carlyle’s mock hero, Caroline seeks an ethical, salutary, modern, and distinctly Victorian way of being, and though Caroline’s near fatal illness certainly contrasts the two narrative options for women in Victorian fiction—death or marriage—it also, and perhaps even more essentially, contrasts two versions of that first moral act, self-annihilation. That Caroline marries Robert is of secondary importance to the fact that in marrying him, and in re-discovering her mother, she annihilates her self-interest but not her mortal body. If we think about the plot schematically, then, we could say that Caroline’s illness, her looking inwards until she becomes indifferent to life itself, is an essential moral prerequisite for her later recovery. She needs to lose her overpowering love of self in order to selflessly dedicate her life to her mother and husband.

In following this trajectory, Shirley resembles a large number of mid-Victorian novels whose marriage plots twin romantic and anti-self-conscious desire. These novels typically begin with a heroine (or hero) prone to introspection and/or fantasy. She suffers an illness, generally one that leaves her, for a time, unconscious, and then re-awakens to find love shortly thereafter.
Often, these illnesses are interpreted, as in the case of *Bleak House* (1853), as a psychological identity crisis, the heroine emerging from her near death experience as a unified self. However, I interpret these scenes as Carlylean Centers of Indifference, places where the heroine briefly annihilates herself, losing interest in life. Her recovery is not so much an indication that she knows who she is, but that she no longer worries the question. Finally able to forget herself, she is ready to devote herself, everlastingly, to her lover. *Bleak House* is an excellent example, Esther’s disease somehow enabling her to narrate less self-consciously and accept the hand of Woodcourt\(^\text{14}\). In *Mary Barton* (1848) the eponymous heroine takes to her bed after the hyper-self-consciousness of the courtroom. Coming to, she is ready to put aside any lingering, self-deluding middle-class aspirations and marry the faithful Jem\(^\text{15}\).

While these make nice narratives, they are hardly satisfying guidebooks to happiness. Caroline’s marriage is an option for her only as a character in a novel. Brontë solves Caroline’s self-conscious plotting by granting her the dream which sucked away her life while it remained unfulfilled, a dream which, not coincidentally, imagines life bound up in others, full of the outward distractions of mothers, husbands, and children. But the make-shift solution to Caroline’s habit of self-indulgent dreaming, a habit readers have been offered and in which they are also perhaps implicated, does not solve the trouble off-page. Closing *Shirley*, the self-invested reader, finds him or herself un-ceremoniously discarded, unnecessary, and alone with that shadow, the self. Brontë, following in the steps of Carlyle, was able to tell (like Hegel perhaps?) a myth (the marriage plot) which could explain the transition from self-consciousness to anti-self-consciousness, but how that transition was to be achieved in real life and how that transition was related or even indebted to art remained unsolved. Reading *Shirley* alongside Carlyle, we are able to see how the novel identifies reading as one of the many predisposing conditions of the
modern disease of self-consciousness at the same time that it tries, unsatisfactorily perhaps, to cure that ailment through the generic conventions of the courtship plot. To put it more simply, *Shirley*, like any number of nineteenth-century social novels, seeks a fictional resolution to a real social or, in this case, psychological problem. However, because reading for that fictional resolution is itself implicated in the tenacity of the disease, the interesting possibility arises that perhaps the whole problem needs to be considered inside out. Perhaps the problematic fictional resolution (the marriage) to real world social or psychological problems needs itself to be “resolved” through a certain kind of reading experience—a reading experience which discourages rather than encourages identification and introspection.

**II. Villette**

The remainder of this chapter considers how *Villette* undertakes the same phenomenological problem of self-consuming self-consciousness that concerns *Shirley* and what I have termed the Carlylean marriage plot. *Villette* engages with that sub-genre, but only to agonize over the transient pleasures the marriage plot affords to those who stand just outside everlasting love. A novel that dares an unwedded consummation, *Villette* has routinely been considered as a critical re-writing of the nineteenth century marriage plot. However, I argue that rather than propose a new narrative resolution, Brontë theorizes a new practice of reading the old narrative.

**Lucy as Reader**

*Villette*, like *Shirley*, spends very little space on reading *per se*. What we do know is that Lucy is not a very good reader, or at least not a very critical one. She reads primarily for character and plot, “flagging inevitably over characterless books” (234) and finding M. Paul’s censoring
scissors the most provoking when their “retrenchments [interrupt] the narrative” (347). She takes “great pleasure in reading a few books” (234) of this style, but there are “few bound and printed volumes that [do] not weary [her]—whose perusal [does] not fag and blind” (381). A “course of regular reading of the driest and thickest books in the library” (267) fails both to “fill existence” (267) and lighten her mood. Lucy, it would seem, seeks books capable of keeping her mind engaged and occupied. Falling back on the figure of imagination as the mind’s eye, she applauds M. Paul’s “tomes of thought” (381) for being “collyrium to the spirit’s eyes” (381), remarking that “over their contents inward sight grew clear and strong (381). On the other hand, Peter Corneille, a great favorite of his, offers “beauties [Lucy] never [can] be brought to perceive” (383), no doubt because of their extreme rationalism. Indeed, Lucy does not really care what she reads at all as long as it helps induce a pleasurable oblivion of the outside world. Procuring a moment’s respite with a book before the fête, she is annoyed to be “snatched back to consciousness” (132) by M. Paul’s “sharpest ring” (132) just when her pleasant surroundings are “beginning to steal meaning from the page, vision from [her] eyes, and to lure [her] along the track of reverie, down some deep dell of dream-land” (132).

Hardly bookish, Lucy is still a reader and, what’s more, a figure or model for her reader. Rather than read printed marriage plots, Lucy reads the living marriage plots she finds at hand, those of Polly Home and Ginevra Fanshawe. In this sense, Villette is less a marriage plot than it is a reading of two. Critics have often remarked Lucy’s marginality in her own novel. She hardly seems to be the heroine, so much so that some first time readers still assume Polly will hold that station after the first few chapters. Indeed, it has occasionally been suggested that Brontë herself did not originally intend to focus on the elusive Lucy Snowe, but whether Brontë intended
Polly as the heroine of her novel at this early stage interests me less than the fact that Polly is
*Lucy*'s heroine.

Arriving at night, like Heathcliff, a “bundle” in the man’s arms, Polly promises all the fascination (and trouble) of that Byronic hero, and Lucy immediately succumbs to the child’s romantic presence. Waking in the middle of the night to behold Polly’s “figure, white and conspicuous in its night dress, kneeling upright in bed, and praying like some Catholic or Methodist enthusiast” (12), Lucy loses her healthy hold on reality, confessing, “I scarcely know what thoughts I had; but they ran risk of being hardly more rational and healthy than that child’s mind must have been” (12). Happening in a moment of transition between conscious states (Lucy is neither asleep nor completely awake), the scene partakes of that “track of reverie,” that “deep dell of dreamland” (132), which Lucy, the reader, values so much. A “figure,” rather than a child, Polly is a “conspicuous” character in a novelistic tableau rather than a roommate with insomnia. Most significantly, however, Lucy blurs the line between her mind and the saint-like child’s. Unlike Caroline, Lucy is capable of “Sunday reading” (*Shirley* 167). Her brain is *not* “too busy, teeming, wandering, to listen to the language of another mind” (*Shirley* 167).

According to the accepted reading, Polly is one of Lucy’s doubles, but it might be more accurate to say that, reading Polly, Lucy identifies strongly with her. Though Lucy asserts that her “cooler temperament secure[s] [her] from participation in . . . [the] angular vagaries” (13) of “sensitive” (13) characters like Polly, her thoughts and actions suggest otherwise. Lucy is keenly interested in Polly’s doings, much more than in her own.

The last night Lucy shares her room with Polly she wonders, “How will [Polly] get through this world, or battle with this life? How will she bear the shocks and repulses, the humiliations and desolations, which books, and my own reason tell me are prepared for all flesh?”
(34) Significantly, Lucy does not ask whether Polly will “bear the shocks,” for not being a heroine, there can be no question that Polly will succeed, receiving, in the end, her connubial reward. Like all marriage plots, it is only the middle of Polly’s story that is shrouded in suspense. That Polly falls out of the novel at this critical moment, returning for the one certain event in her life (her marriage), ensures her status as a placeholder for all marriage plot heroines. Left as we found her, a character with a beginning and an end, Polly is the heroine of every marriage plot we have not read. Lucy, of course, is the opposite, all middle and no end, her beginning unremembered. She is in exactly the same position as every one of Polly’s readers, the same position as you and I. At the end of the novel, this will still be so. Sunny imaginations can hope for Lucy; they can hope for themselves, but they cannot know how either story will find its close.

Polly is not the only heroine of Lucy’s imagination. Indeed, she plots marriage with all the fervor of Caroline, but rather than dream them up about herself, Lucy concocts them for Ginevra Fanshawe. It is Ginevra’s novel, and not Polly’s that we, along with Lucy, get to read more or less all the way through, and it is hers, therefore, which tells us the most about how Lucy reads the old, familiar narrative of the marriage plot. At first, Lucy reads *Ginevra Fanshawe* (if I may be allowed to so title the work) in a relatively straightforward and routine, if wrong-headed, manner. She is presented with a “girl, pretty and fair” (53) just embarking, alone, on a journey. Lucy, again, does not know what the middle will bring, and is unsure “Whether this particular young lady [is] of the sort that can the most safely be left unwatched” (53). However, the genre of *Ginevra Fanshawe*, as well as its ending, seems pretty clear. Ginevra has “five sisters and three brothers. By-and-by [the sisters] are to marry—rather elderly gentlemen . . . with cash: papa and mama will manage that” (55). Perhaps Lucy has chosen to pass her time on the boat with a cosmopolitan Austen novel?
Lucy draws attention to the difference between the heroine and herself—the difference of ending. When Ginevra descends to the cabin, Lucy, perhaps cheered and comforted by the promise of *Ginevra*’s plot, muses that “an uncertain future, [is] not [an] oppressive [evil], so long as the frame is healthy and the faculties are employed; so long, especially, as Liberty lends us her wings, and Hope guides us by her star” (56). The second qualification is perhaps the most important, for it is being “employed” with reading her pretty companion that has enabled Lucy to look on things so cheerily. Once Ginevra is below, out of sight and out of mind, Lucy’s vicarious optimism fails her:

> Cancel the whole of that, if you please, reader—or rather let it stand, and draw thence a moral—an alliterative, text-hand copy—
> “Day-dreams are delusions of the demon.” (57)

The “reader,” of course, refers not only to us, but also to Lucy herself, and is evidence of just how cynical Lucy is about the tendency of readers, herself and us included, to construct elaborate but thoroughly conventional interpretations. When the ship lands, “a whole family of friends surrounded and bore away Miss Fanshawe” (58). Lucy “dare[s] not for one moment dwell on a comparison of positions” (58). Here is the same moral, framed a different way. Do not let your reading become your day-dream or, like Caroline, a heart-breaking comparison will surely accompany your heroine’s leavetaking.

Lucy does not, however, take leave of Ginevra for long, and the bizarre coincidence of her arrival at the very same pensionnat attended by her new found heroine may, in fact, be best accounted for through a kind of identificatory logic. We cannot explain how Lucy gets to Madame Beck’s any more than she can explain it herself. Entering a psychological maze of streets, she simply seems to imagine her way into the setting of Ginevra’s novel. Perhaps having spied a “young distinguished, and handsome man” (62), but “deep[ly] conscious of all absence of
claim to look for further help from such a one as he” (63), Lucy places herself as close as she can to the very person she imagines might make such a claim, the sparkling Ginevra.

Critics have made much of Lucy’s status as a nobody (a designation given by Ginevra), but perhaps she is a nobody in no more than this: Lucy Snowe—an illuminated patch of white—is an empty space in which the reader can see him or herself clearly, as reader. Reading Lucy read Ginevra through the lens of the marriage plot, we see ourselves projected back to us, complete with all our readerly mistakes. Lucy’s eagerness to plot Ginevra in the traditional manner despite all evidence to the contrary reflects our own plotting imaginations. Take, for example, the “semi-mystery of the parure” in which Lucy demonstrates her rather embarrassing curiosity about Ginevra’s sartorial benefactor. When the always broke Ginevra shows off a particularly costly party ensemble, Lucy must discover the secret. First she asks, “Did M. de Bassompierre give you those jewels?” (88), and then, “Were they presents from Mrs. Cholmondeley?” (89) Three days later when Ginevra confesses to accepting presents from her lover, Lucy immediately attempts to fit this new and shocking piece of information into the expected plot, and she explains aloud to Ginevra, “Perhaps, however, you now feel certain that you will be able to marry M. Isidore—your parents and uncle have given their consent—and, for your part, you love him entirely?” (90) Ginevra is quick to deny any such possibility, but despite having been given every indication of Ginevra’s greed, flippancy, and moral questionability, Lucy holds her ground, confident in her knowledge of how the narrative should go:

Excuse me, I must believe this language is mere nonsense and coquetry. There is nothing great about you, yet you are above profiting by the good nature and the purse of a man to whom you feel absolute indifference. You love M. Isidore far more than you think, or will avow. (91)

If Lucy sounds ridiculous, we may do well to think back to our first reading of Villette (if someone hadn’t already ruined the ending for us). How sure were we that things would look up
for Lucy and Dr. John? And even when those expectations were dashed, how much money would we have been willing to bet on the society page announcement, “Lately, M. Paul Emmanuel to Miss Lucy Snowe”?

**Self-murderous survival**

Lucy’s readerly engagement in Ginevra’s plot does not continue as innocently as it begins, nor, for that matter, did Brontë’s writerly engagement with Lucy. As the months passed after her sister’s deaths and the reality of her own losses sank in, Brontë’s remarkable ability to redirect her attention from her crisis to her craft, so helpful during *Shirley*’s composition, deserted her. She began sketches for her next novel almost immediately following the publication of *Shirley* in the fall of 1849; however, her letters indicate that she was unable to gain momentum on *Villette* for another two years, only beginning to write seriously sometime in 1852. Even then, she continually complained of the challenges besetting her struggle for concentration, periodically finding she could write nothing at all. Dreaming up *Shirley*, Brontë had realized a way to take herself “out of a dark and desolate reality to an unreal but happier region” through the imaginative composition of a marriage plot, but as her depiction of Caroline’s marital daydreams illustrates, she was also aware that such comforting fictions, while they provide temporary escape from pain and reality, may actually feed an ultimately unsustainable cycle of self-idealizing fantasy and self-consuming introspection. It comes as no surprise, then, to find that Lucy’s imaginative and identificatory interest in Ginevra is implicated in a similarly troubling psychological pattern.

The strange pseudo-interactive relationship between engaged readers and the characters in their novels that Lucy’s interactions with Ginevra dramatizes reaches a crisis point when
Lucy is left alone in the *pensionnat* for the long vacation. Finding her life “a hopeless desert” (156) and struggling to occupy her mind, she, like Caroline when alone in the mute house, finds solace in mental plotting. However, rather than starring herself, these little narratives star just about everybody else from the Rue Fossette:

> While wandering in solitude, I would sometimes picture the present probable position of others, my acquaintance. There was Madam Beck at a cheerful watering-place with her children, her mother, and a whole troop of friends who had sought the same scene of relaxation. Zélie St. Pierre was at Paris, with her relatives; the other teachers were at their homes. . .

But it is, of course, Ginevra who occupies Lucy’s mind the most:

> . . . There was Ginevra Fanshawe whom certain of her connections had carried on a pleasant tour southward. Ginevra seemed the happiest. She was on the route of beautiful scenery; these September suns shone for her on fertile plains, where harvest and vintage matured under their mellow beam. These gold and crystal moons rose on her vision over blue horizons waved in mountain lines.

> But all this was nothing; I too felt those autumn suns and saw those harvest moons, and I almost wished to be covered in with earth and turf, deep out of their influence; for I could not live in their light, nor make them comrades, nor yield them affection. But Ginevra had a kind of spirit with her, empowered to give constant strength and comfort, to gladden daylight and embalm darkness; the best of the good genii that guard humanity curtained her with his wings, and canopied her head with his bending form. By True Love was Ginevra followed: never could she be alone. (158-59)

Lucy not only imagines Ginevra’s life vividly, she identifies strongly with her imaginary version of her friend. As Lucy describes what Ginevra sees, she and the reader take on Ginevra’s fictional eyes, seeing the crystal moons and blue horizons until, in a moment of rhetorical brilliance, the two viewers become completely confused. The paragraph breaks as Lucy realizes that she sees what Ginevra sees. For a brief moment Lucy and her heroine are one and the same, and the realization of this confusion, the stepping back and comparing her fantasy of herself as Ginevra with her present life, sends Lucy into a kind of suicidal despair: “But all that was nothing.”
What is most interesting about this passage is precisely what makes Lucy rashly wish for death. It is not because Ginevra is on a “pleasant tour southward,” not because she is beautiful, or even because she is with friends. Rather, it is because Lucy imagines Ginevra as being in spiritual communion with the world around her. Looking on the same sights, Lucy is only aware of her separateness from it. Ginevra “never [can] be . . . alone” because “True Love” follows her and, I would argue, propels her narrative. Backed by novelistic convention, Lucy refuses to believe Ginevra indifferent to Dr. John, but rather, “conceive[s] an electric chord of sympathy between them, a fine chain of mutual understanding, sustaining union through a separation of a hundred leagues—carrying across mount and hollow, communication by prayer and wish” (159).

What could this incredible chain be if not the chain of events which joins hero and heroine across the course of the novel, ensuring their eventual union? At this moment, Lucy makes her readerly relationship with Ginevra explicit: “Ginevra gradually became with me a sort of heroine” (159), and recalling Rochester’s speech in Jane Eyre, we might venture to say we know which one:

I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you . . . it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous Channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I’ve a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly. (221)

Rather than re-write the marriage plot of Jane Eyre, Brontë shows us Jane Eyre being, in effect, re-read. However, like Jane Eyre’s original readers, Lucy is unable to achieve the necessary personal detachment from the heroine. She isn’t able to let the “novel” distract her mind from preying upon itself. Consequently, “perceiving this growing illusion,” and perhaps we should add, perceiving how different the illusion of Ginevra Fanshawe is from the reality of Lucy Snowe, Lucy realizes “her nerves are getting over-stretched” (159). She immediately falls ill, stops eating, and takes to bed. A terrible, memorable sequence of nightmares, visions,
wanderings, and confessions follow, culminating in Lucy’s dramatic swoon at the close of the first volume. The similarity to Caroline’s experience in *Shirley* is striking. Just like Caroline, Lucy finds a pleasurable escape in going through marriage plots in her mind. Also like Caroline, her self-investment ensures that their necessary termination will demand an extremely painful withdrawal. In both cases, the bliss and pain of these self-centered cycles of imagination and rumination are directly linked to a dramatic, Carlylean breakdown. Describing this time, Lucy leaves no doubt of her mental state. She asserts that she “hardly knew how [she] was to live to the end” (156), and even if she had known, “the future . . . gave no inducement to bear present evil” (156). Finally, she admits, “a sorrowful indifference to existence often pressed on me—a despairing resignation to reach betimes the end of all things earthly” (156). However, the similarity ends here. Caroline is saved from her deathly melancholia by a kind of *Deus ex machina*—a mother for Caroline is discovered, a brother for the hero shows up with prior claims on Caroline’s rival. In other words, the plot steps in to enable Caroline to make the necessary change in perspective from inside out. Like Brontë’s earlier novels, *Villette* follows its protagonist into a quasi-suicidal abyss, but in this case, it resurfaces somewhere entirely different from that of the other three. Lucy does not, like Crimsworth, Jane, and Caroline, reach outwards in loving affirmation on the other side of her internal crisis; rather she returns to consciousness against her will. The difference is striking. When “heavy dreams [having] rolled away,” Teufelsdröckh awakens to achieve that “first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self,” he finds his “mind’s eyes . . . now unsealed, and its hands ungyved.” Caroline also gains her sight, finally seeing Mrs. Pryor for who she is and finding the “world is all changed to [her]” (436). But Lucy’s “returning sense of sight [comes] upon [her], red, as if it swam in blood” (165), and her mind’s eye, her “Imagination . . . re-enter[s] her prison with pain, with a moan and a long shiver”
Clearly, Lucy does not awake in the Everlasting Yea or with any profound insight into her soul.

Nonetheless, Lucy awakens triumphant. For, though Lucy doesn’t “triumph over Death” with the grandiloquence of Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh, she still defeats her adversary through the humble means afforded her. To speak of Lucy’s fainting fit as she does, as a struggle with or to the death, may seem overdone, but to read Lucy’s gruesome hints and hedgings as all metaphor and rhetoric is to deny Lucy her major victories as well as her greatest challenges. The Carlylean marriage plot narrates (generally optimistically) the truism that the traditional nineteenth century novel presents women with a choice of marriage or death. The heroine must walk through the valley of the shadow before she can walk down the aisle. Lucy’s story, then, is as much about finding an alternative to death as it is about finding an alternative to the Everlasting I Do. Indeed, Lucy powerfully revises not only the marriage plot, but Sartor Resartus and Werther as well. If she does not, like most heroines, take the matrimonial solution to self-consciousness, she does not accept the masculine ones either. She finds nothing everlasting in this world or the next, except resistance. Lucy narrates the continual struggle to be solitary and the continual struggle to survive. She narrates the forever and ever of the day to day.

Before and after her swoon, the opacity of Lucy’s language guards her ambivalent feelings. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that, on some level, Lucy wishes for death and, in particular, for the unconsciousness that death brings to the troubled mind. The first volume ends with Lucy’s loss of consciousness—“I seemed to pitch headlong down an abyss. I remember no more” (164)—and the second opens repeating the same sentiment—“Where my soul went during that swoon I cannot tell” (165). Bookending the rupture between the two volumes in this way,
Brontë emphasizes the simple fact of unconsciousness, of absolute freedom from thought, but this does not stop Lucy from telling a story to fill the gap of silence in her mind:

She [Imagination] may have gone upward, and come in sight of her eternal home, hoping for leave to rest now, and deeming that her painful union with matter was at last dissolved. While she so deemed, an angel may have warned her away from heaven’s threshold, and, guiding her weeping down, have bound her, once more, all shuddering and unwilling, to that poor frame, cold and wasted, of whose companionship she was grown more than weary. (165)

Personifying Imagination rather than the spirit or the soul, the passage has the uncanny effect of describing what may be dimly remembered from the past, and also what is happening in the present, for Lucy’s imagination is imagining itself going upward. The Imagination desires, and indeed enacts, her own negation, and the impossibility of permanent oblivion in an eternal home as blank and bereft of self-narration as the break between the chapters draws tears from the melancholic mind’s eye. Indeed, the imagination of Lucy, the entity supposedly composing our novel, longs for the entire project to end with volume one and is “more than weary” to continue on with volumes two and three.

There is an echo in this longing of Caroline’s painful withdrawals from her romantic fantasies of Robert. Each awakening dreamer experiences the chill of reality, registering the shock of the cognitive transition. Caroline watches Moore’s imagined figure turn to a “cold and ghostly grey” shadow, while she, “left solitary at last . . . crept to her couch, chill and dejected” (245). Lucy’s imagination “all shuddering and unwilling” returns “to that poor frame, cold and wasted” (165). Though Lucy’s language recall’s Caroline’s, what is striking is the similarity of sentiment. Both Caroline and Lucy long to be unconscious of their existence in a real and troubled world. To extend the earlier comparison, we might say that the affinity between the daydreaming Caroline and the engaged novel reader is shared by Lucy as well. In Shirley and
Villette, Brontë focuses on how it feels to make a mental transition, to take leave of one state of consciousness and enter another. Nevertheless, the experiences figure opposing types of reading.

Erotic and self-indulgent, Caroline’s daydreams heighten rather than diminish her sense of self and easily transform into painful, but equally self-centered rumination. Longing for self-forgetfulness in order to maintain her identification with Shirley, and imagining herself in the role she believes Shirley to play in the marriage plot, Caroline acts almost as a warning to overly identificatory readers. The narrative Lucy tells to fill the time unaccounted for during her swoon, however, is one of self-annihilation, a death wish. In fact, by substituting her Imagination for herself (the more natural image at heaven’s gates), Lucy absents herself from her own botched ascension.

Thus, it is difficult to understand Lucy’s fantasy about her swoon in terms of the “self-perpetuating” cycle of daydream and introspection. Indeed, the situation is quite the opposite. This melancholy reverie on the paradise of lost selfhood is the high point of a whole series of self-murderous fantasies on Lucy’s part, which, I argue, performatively execute the self in the mind, so that the self in the world may live in peace. Finally, just as there is a self-indulgent reading practice which corresponds to Caroline’s wish-fulfilling fantasies, there is a self-annihilating form of reading that corresponds to Lucy’s masochistic imaginings.

Lucy Snowe routinely commits what Barbara Gates, writing of Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, and Florence Nightingale, terms “the legitimate form of Victorian suicide . . . not literal death but renunciation of self” (30). She also struggles with more illegitimate suicidal thoughts. While I think the text leaves little room for doubt on the subject, whether or not Lucy actually is contemplating suicide is immaterial to my argument. What is important is that she routinely engages in what can be thought of as self-consuming, self-destructive, and figuratively
suicidal thinking patterns that jeopardize her happiness, her employment, and her relationships, if not her actual life, and combats these thoughts by metaphorically killing the self that thinks them.

Two quick examples delineate the pattern. First, when Mrs. Bretton begs Lucy to add another night to her stay at La Terrasse, Lucy, afraid of the self-torturing feelings aroused by a prolonged farewell, tells the reader, "I longed to leave them as the criminal on the scaffold longs for the axe to descend: that is, I wished the pang over" (227). Rather than confront the emotions and thoughts surrounding this leave-taking and separation, Lucy imagines being beheaded: not wanting to think about her sorrow, Lucy visualizes cutting off the physical residence of those unwanted thoughts, much as one might cut off a gangrenous leg to stop an infection. By imaginatively committing a violent crime against herself, Lucy is able, at least for a time, to prevent an equally invisible, but much more ordinary form of self-harm—rumination.

Lucy uses a similar technique to “steel” herself against her mind when she sees M. Paul in the park with Justine Marie and is convinced of his sure desertion:

I invoked Conviction to nail upon me the certainty, abhorred while embraced, to fix it with the strongest spikes her strongest strokes could drive; and when the iron had entered well my soul, I stood up, as I thought renovated. (467)

Here again Lucy sentences herself to capital punishment, this time a crucifixion, and yet the image is about as empty of sacrificial connotations as an allusion to crucifixion can be. The religiosity of the metaphoric death is strangely eclipsed by the violence of the language, the demand for pain almost blotting out the reason for its infliction. And, of course, this is the whole point. Almost counterintuitively, here and in the other examples, Lucy wants to think of something so overwhelmingly painful that she won’t have the mental capacity to reflect on the ache of her real losses. Indeed, rather than a crucifixion, we might say that Lucy is imagining her suicide: her mutilated body at the crossroads, an iron spike driven deep into her heart.
Of course, both of these violent acts occur at a kind of crossroads. In each, Lucy is called painfully back to reality as though from her novel by M Paul’s “sharpest ring.” Leaving the Bretton’s comfortable home for her life of toil at the pensionat and seeing M. Paul with his young, attractive ward, Lucy realizes that she has been allowing herself to identify with “the heroine” in a marriage plot. She realizes that the story she has been narrating is not her own, but one to which she has no “claim” (63). This story belongs to Polly, to Ginevra, to Justine Marie, but not to such as her, a reader fated to live, as Frank Kermode might say, “in the middest” (7). At these crossroads, crossroads which, significantly, take place at a leavetaking, Lucy must decide whether to disengage herself from the marriage plot or to dream on, knowing full well that she only puts off the inevitable, painful return if she continues to delude herself a little longer. It is the same crossroads which faces us at the end of any novel. Will we, like Lucy, sever our heads, part company, return to our embodied existence? Or will we try to re-create the novel in our own world, continue to identify, and break our hearts when it proves un-lasting?

Living life, with all its hardships and uncertainties, Lucy, like most of us, seeks periodic distractions. As much as she can, Lucy fills her mind with her work, but she also chooses to read marriage plots. However, Lucy, like many readers, takes the escapism of distraction to its more sinister second level. Rather than escape self-consciousness, Lucy, through her tendency to identify, attempts to create a second self, merging her consciousness with those of heroines whose lives, like Polly’s, through the Everlasting I Do, “anticipate the happiness of Heaven” (436). So begins the self-perpetuating cycle of identification and introspection, entering into one and exiting into the other ad infinitum. Lucy attempts to mitigate the psychological damage of hyper-engaged serial reading by becoming a kind of serial self-killer. Each time she realizes the disparity between her identificatory dreams and her real life she performs a metaphorical
execution on this dream self like the beheading and crucifixtion described above. Early in the novel when Lucy leaves the Brettons where she had identified so heavily with the young Polly Home, she imagines herself drowning, the “rush and saltiness of the briny waves in [her] throat, and their icy pressure on [her] lungs” (35). As she embarks for France, having entertained hopes that she, like a heroine, might receive a husband-enticing inheritance from Mrs. Marchmont, she thinks “of the Styx, and of Charon rowing some solitary soul to the Land of Shades” (51). After Graham reappears in the narrative as Dr. John, Lucy catches herself “long[ing], achingly . . . for something to fetch [her] out of her present existence, and lead [her] upwards and onwards” (109). She responds by taking these thoughts and “knock[ing] them on the head . . . figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples” (110). Once she recognizes the hopeless folly of her romantic identification with Ginevra during the long vacation, Lucy first dreams of drinking “Suffering, brewed in temporal or calculable measure” (159), of the “end come and past” (159), and then re-writes her swoon as her Imagination knocking on the gates of heaven. Again leaving the Brettons, Lucy imagines her own be-heading. When Polly returns and Lucy finally puts a permanent stop to dreaming about Graham, she buries his letters, “a grief” (296) beneath the pear, “leaning against the tree; lingering, like any other mourner, beside a newly-sodden grave” (296). Seeing M Paul with Justine Marie, she crucifies herself, mutilating her suicidal body at the crossroads.

It is through these imagined suicides, however, that Lucy survives, in marked contrast to the hopelessly passive Caroline, whose obsession with a marriage plot leads almost to a burial plot. By the end of the novel, however, all of Lucy’s practice in performing anti-self-consciousness through imaginary acts of brutal self-violence translates into an ability to read anti-self-consciously. We can read Paulina and Ginevra as Lucy’s doubles because Lucy reads
them that way, because she identifies through them, engages with their plots and imagines
herself in their places. By the end of Villette, Lucy has finished reading both Paulina de
Bassompierre and Ginevra Fanshawe; however, as Lucy (and her readers) put each of these texts
down, we realize that a significant change has occurred in the way Lucy interacts with both
heroines. Each of these works concludes with its own conventional nineteenth-century epilogue.
At the close of the last chapter to concern Paulina, Lucy gives the following detailed summary of
the happy pair’s future life together:

   Let me not delay the happy truth. Graham Bretton and Paulina de Bassompierre were
   married . . . This pair was blessed indeed, for years brought them, with great prosperity,
great goodness; they imparted with open hand, yet wisely. . . In the fulness of years, M.
de Bassompierre was taken; in ripe old age departed Louisa Bretton. Once even there
rose a cry in their halls, of Rachel weeping for her children; but others sprang healthy and
blooming to replace the lost. . . In short, I do but speak the truth when I say that these
two lives of Graham and Paulina were blessed, like that of Jacob’s favoured son, with
‘blessings of Heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies under,’ It was so, for God saw
that it was good. (436-47)

A couple of chapters later, Ginevra makes her final appearance in the novel in a similarly
complete summary:

   In winding up Mistress Fanshawe’s memoirs, the reader will no doubt expect to hear that
she came finally to bitter expiation of her youthful levities. Of course, a large share of
suffering lies in reserve for her future?
   A few words will embody my farther knowledge respecting her. . . . During the
first year or two, it was only of herself and Alfred she wrote; then, Alfred faded in the
background; herself and a certain new-comer prevailed; one Alfred Fanshawe de
Bassompierre de Hamal began to reign in his father’s stead. . . . Under every cloud, no
matter what its nature, Ginevra, as of old, called out lustily for sympathy and aid. She had
no notion of meeting any distress single-handed. In some shape, from some quarter or
other, she was pretty sure to obtain her will, and so she got on—fighting the battle of life
by proxy, and, on the whole, suffering as little as any human being I have ever known.”
(477-79)

Each of these epilogues contains the classic components of the generic convention, further
illustrating how completely Paulina and Ginevra’s narratives can be read as interpolated novels. Each
couple has children who resemble at least one of their parents. We learn who dies and who
lives out their lives in happy contentment. Most importantly, however, these epilogues resemble similar nineteenth-century novel endings in tone. The tone of Lucy’s voice, still slightly ironic, has, nevertheless, completely changed. She narrates these epilogues with all the composed indifference of the most detached of omniscient narrators. In the Finale of Middlemarch, the narrator remarks, “Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years?” Lucy’s sentiments seem similar, perhaps slightly nostalgic, but nothing more. It is not that Lucy has gone from being a reader to a narrator, but that she has become a seasoned reader. The best readers, Brontë seems to imply are those who read, not with omniscience, but with the selfless, detached, unflappable tone of omniscience.

Lucy has learned to absorb herself in the narratives of others, to distract her troubled mind with their loves and losses, without identifying, without attempting to re-create herself in their guise. During her courtship, Paulina asks Lucy in a telling moment, “Do other people see him with my eyes? Do you admire him?” (424). Lucy replies, “I never see him . . . I value vision, and dread being struck stone blind” (424-25). What Paulina has, in effect, asked is, “Do you want to be me? Do you identify with me?” Lucy’s reply denies precisely this and adds something more. Not to see Graham (or not to see him in that way) is a choice Lucy makes for her own survival. Though she may gain a certain relief from distracting herself with the story of her two friends, she also values the ability to see them (and herself) clearly, to maintain perspective, to delineate between fiction and reality.

Brontë’s fiction, especially Shirley, but also The Professor and Jane Eyre, make plain the courtship plot that underlies Teufelsdröckh’s journey to the Everlasting Yea and the divine state of self-unconsciousness. In each of these three texts, trouble in courtship leads to melancholy, which leads to a state of self-annihilation, which leads to Everlasting Yea (the “I do” till “death
do us part”). In other words, Brontë reveals how Carlyle’s mythic re-integration of the subject and his world differs precious little from that more popular myth of female integration, the marriage plot. In *Villette*, however, Brontë rejects the finality of the crisis model offered by Carlyle in *Sartor*, just as she rejects the finality of marriage for her “courtship novel.” For Brontë, there will always be another crisis. Only Ginevra and Paulina can have epilogues. For the rest of us, the first moral act of self-annihilation must constantly be repeated. However, this need not be a painful process. At first Lucy pays for her self-indulgent trips into marriage plots in psychological blood. The act of self-annihilation is a painfully violent one, made worse by the self-idealizing process of reading. By the end of *Ginevra Fanshawe* and *Paulina de Bassompierre*, however, Lucy has found a way to achieve anti-self-consciousness, to make that first moral act, through reading itself. Reading about others allows her to forget, not aggrandize herself, and the cure for self-consciousness becomes repeating these pleasant periods of self-oblivion as needed.

We ought not to be surprised then to find that *Villette* ends without an epilogue. A reader rather than a character, Lucy’s life can never attain an Everlasting Yea, nor can it attain the marriage plot’s equivalent, the Everlasting I Do. So far, I have had little to say about M Paul. Where does he fit in this novel of reading? Lucy, arguably, gets more involved in the plot of M Paul than in any other. And yet, once again, it is the way she takes leave of M Paul’s story that tells the most about her engagement with it. *Villette* closes with one more imaginary scene of death. Lucy envisions the “destroying angel of tempest” achieving his perfect work” (495); the “sun returning, his light was night to some” (495). Perhaps for the first time, however, the imagined death is not her own. Echoing that earlier passage in which Lucy distanced herself from the pain of her past by imagining herself the victim of a shipwreck, Lucy’s absence from
this watery nightmare haunts her prophetic prose. Lucy no longer slaughters herself at the end of her fantasies, she slaughters the characters—their world ends so that hers can continue. Reading the ending this way, allowing Lucy to read the ending this way, the object of uncertainty changes altogether in the memorable paragraph. There is no longer any question whether or not M Paul survives the shipwreck. Quite simply, as a character, he cannot survive the limit of his diegetic existence. Only we will resurface into reality. Yet, our leavetaking may still “leave sunny imaginations hope,” though a hope of a different kind. Closing *Villette* and catching our breath in our real lives, we may hope for the “rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return” (496), but the rapture and reprieve of a distracting escape, the return to another marriage plot where, if we are careful to keep a safe distance, we may “picture union and a happy succeeding life” (496).
Notes

1 Indeed, Nussey believed the melancholic Caroline Helstone to be modeled after herself. Most critics, however, agree that Anne is the more likely prototype.

2 The term escapist reading suggests a popular, unsophisticated, and irresponsible kind of reading. While I consider this aspect of escapism in this chapter, I also seek to expand our understanding of the term. An academic nervousness about escapism has prevented the reading practice’s proper theorization. This chapter seeks, in part, to recuperate it for critical use.

3 See Richard Altick’s *The English Common Reader*, Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader*, Patrick Brantlinger’s *The Reading Lesson*, and more recently, Nicholas Dames’s *The Physiology of the Novel* for a fascinating account of how Victorian readers were interested in the immersive possibilities and dangers of novel reading.

4 An excellent example is Sally Mitchell’s 1977 article “Sentiment and Suffering: Women’s Recreational Reading in the 1860s.” Mitchell goes beyond the argument that women enjoyed such fiction because it provided them with certain kinds of liberating escapes to theorize *how* fictional conventions of this particular decade went about creating these fantasies.

5 Of course, writers routinely insisted that they were not writing exciting fiction (The opening chapter of *Shirley* is a perfect example). However, such claims, wrapped up as they are in questions of realism, only reinforce my assertion that canonical fiction was deeply concerned with escapist reading practices.

6 Dames uses his theory of physiological reading to assert that the Victorians were, in fact, not escapist readers. In so doing, Dames continues the common practice of using escapism to refer to a poorly theorized, always negative, somewhat irresponsible form of unreflective pleasure reading. My broader definition of escapism, which focuses less on the effects of escapism and more on the its goals, i.e., lessening or evading the experience of reality, allows us to see how any reading which seeks to divide our attention from the world around us participates in a kind of escapism which cannot be judged as trifling without further, case-specific examination.

7 Caroline’s return from “an enchanted region to the real world” recalls Brontë’s description of her imaginative process when writing the novel itself (“the occupation of writing has been a boon to me—it took me out of dark and desolate reality to an unreal but happier region.”) and reminds us that Brontë’s “unreal but happier region” was equally unsustainable. Robert’s shadowy body attains a poignancy not achieved by the plotted romance when we remember the two shadowy bodies Brontë watched fade away and no doubt frequently return.

8 Again, this grey shape can be read as both Caroline and her projection of Robert, further undermining the difference between the two in her dream world.

9 Torgerson argues that the references to cholera, a recent issue in sanitary reform, would have encouraged readers to think about Caroline’s illness and “women’s health” in similar terms as problems created by certain societal conditions (the condition of women) and thus amenable to “the new approach in the prevention of illness—social reform” (43).

10 Denise Riley, in her book, *Am I that Name?* deconstructs the seemingly benign category of women, arguing that, historically unstable, “women” can neither identify a coherent group of subjects, nor sum up the multiplicitous nature of any individual. She warns feminists against the hasty use of the term, but she might more usefully warn literary critics. If the novels of female authors, with the exception of George Eliot, are rarely considered as engaging in major
philosophic questions of the period, we need look no farther than the fact that we rarely credit their heroines with identities besides that of their gender.

Christian theology, with its emphasis on self-sacrifice is, of course, a very suggestive complement to the sometimes wish-fulfilling marriage plot. It is also possible that the scare-quotings of ‘fit for Sunday reading,’ alludes to the somewhat scandalous possibility that Caroline wants bodily, not spiritual stimulation to be part of the story.

Her description of the beginning contrasts brilliantly with the opening of Jane Eyre: “There was no possibility of taking a walk that day,” sounding much closer to that of Shirley, the novel she is in: “Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you” (5).

Of course, Caroline’s fever is over-determined, and can be read as a product of her self-conscious rumination and day-dreaming, but also as simply a bad cold. In addition, an approach more indebted to depth psychology than my own could read Caroline’s illness as a psychological expression of her struggle to form an identity in the absence of a mother.

The physical scarring of Esther’s face and the veil she wears subsequently further bring home the theme of self-annihilation.

Interestingly enough, Dickens routinely follows the Carlylean marriage formula for his male protagonists. David Copperfield, Little Dorrit, Martin Chuzzlewit, and Our Mutual Friend could all be considered examples.

This point is suggested by Tim Dolin’s note on Corneille in the 2000 Oxford World’s Classics edition of Villette.

See May Sinclair’s interpretation. Most critics, however, believe that, at least by the time she started the first chapters, Brontë had decided on Lucy as her protagonist.

Bronte was aware of both the fascination and the unreality surrounding Paulina’s character. She writes to George Smith in 1852:

I greatly apprehend, however, that the weakest character in the book is the one I aimed at making the most beautiful, and if this be the case—the fault lies in its wanting the germ of the real, in its being purely imaginary. I felt that this character lacked substance: I fear the reader will feel the same. Union with it—resembles too much the fate of Ixion who was mated with a Cloud” (Letters III 88).

Of course a kind of generic heroine, Paulina is both the weakest, substanceless, unreal character and the most beautiful. The concluding emphasis on her marriage re-enforces Paulina’s primary purpose, matrimony and, simultaneously, suggests how the marriage plot ending evaporates any meaningful selfhood.

DuPlessis spells out this choice in Writing Beyond the Ending.

The evidence is legion. Nevertheless, I am not averse to leaving sunny imaginations hope.

The sarcastic element in Ginevra’s epilogue also comments on the genre it imitates. It might seem like there could be no two characters as different as Ginevra and Polly. However, they are also exactly the same. Both marriage plot heroines, their disparate middles are inconsequential. All that matters is their beginning and, most importantly, their end.

The second to last paragraph in Villette reads:

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (496)
The final paragraph is an ironic epilogue for the “bad” characters:

Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walraven
fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell. (496)
Critical Escapism, Surface Reading, and George Eliot’s *Romola*¹

The nineteenth century, of course, does not have a monopoly on morbid self-consciousness or on the desire to escape it. The impulse to self-interrogation continues to exhaust generation after generation of critical, reflective thinkers, and twenty-first century readers and authors still seek temporary escape in literature of all stripes. But escapism is hardly limited to our leisure time—it seeps into our scholarship as well. Indeed, though I have been discussing morbid self-consciousness and the anti-self-conscious desire to escape it in relation to Victorian literature, the same mental habit and corrective vision can be seen of late in literary criticism as well. By way of a coda to my project I would like to offer some final thoughts on the after-life of Victorian anti-self-consciousness not in the marriage plot, but in current debates surrounding the proper methodology for literary study. I argue that the methodological practice that has come to be referred to as “surface reading,” despite (and to a large extent because of) its self-conscious reassessment of contemporary literary criticism and theory, displays a powerful, yet unrecognized anti-self-conscious desire that manifests itself most strongly in a weariness with depth models of interpretation, a rejection of political engagement, and a persistent rhetoric of humility that functions, in part, to deny the relentless subjectivity (and egocentrism) of all critical pursuits. We are, it would seem, in a decidedly Victorian critical moment.

The past couple of decades have witnessed a growing dissatisfaction with the dominant methodologies of literary studies. The fundamental assumption shared by almost every school of critical theory in the past century—that there is something to be revealed (even if that something is absence itself) has come under fire from critics of various stamps who fault what they often refer to as a hermeneutics of suspicion or depth hermeneutics for encouraging an antagonistic
relationship to the object of study. Critical theory of the past has been guilty, it would seem, of ignoring form, devaluing aesthetics, jeering at humanism, perpetuating humanism, relying too heavily on grand master narratives, naively believing that literary criticism can effect meaningful change, and generally demonstrating an unsavory and ill-founded egotism.

As a corrective to these deeply ingrained critical bad habits, the detractors of depth hermeneutics have joined sociology in the descriptive turn, espousing anti-depth approaches to literary study often referred to collectively as surface reading. However, despite its growing popularity, few examples of surface reading have appeared to clarify how the practice differs from previous methodologies, and the rather amorphous group of reading techniques that constitute this approach makes it difficult to evaluate the practitioners’ claims. It may seem counterintuitive, but the specific agenda of surface reading is hard to see. Indeed, it seems we need a suspicious reader to make sense of it.

John Kucich has attempted just such a suspicious reading. In “The Unfinished Historicist Project: In Praise of Suspicion” (2011), he identifies the threats surface reading poses to literary studies, arguing that we stand to lose both our “credibility among non-humanists” and “the specific skill humanists bring to data: interpretation” (65). He also explains what may not seem at all obvious—why surface reading constitutes a threat to historicism. Though surface readers rarely condemn historicism per se (preferring to assail related methodologies such as Marxism and, in Rita Felski’s case, Foucauldian theory), they do so implicitly by belittling its practices and politics (Kucich 65, 71). Kucich’s painstaking historicization calls attention to the fact that practitioners of surface rely heavily on Paul Ricoeur’s term, the hermeneutics of suspicion, “as a shorthand for a broader critical temperament” (68). Yet, the connection between this temperament and Ricoeur’s method is tenuous. As Kucich notes, surface readers rarely seem
aware of the fact that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic found its “double motivation” in a simultaneous “willingness to suspect” and “willingness to listen.” (Ricoeur qtd. in Kucich 68). Surface reading thus articulates its theoretical urgency through its dis-identification with a methodology to which no one ever formally subscribed.

Kucich calls for a more rigorous theorization of the relation between diachronic and synchronic approaches to history, suggesting that we wait to pull the plug on historicism until we thoroughly consider how it might subsequently be revitalized. And yet, it is not even clear that pulling the plug is what surface reading has in mind. The term “surface reading” derives, of course, from “The Way We Read Now,” a 2009 special issue of Representations co-edited by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus. If the contributors to that issue are any indication, surface readers agree that the historicist project is “unfinished.” As Lauren Goodlad and Andrew Sartori note,, four of the five expressly promote or practice a historically-minded approach to their subject matter. Moreover, Marcus’s Between Women (2007), in which she introduces the term “just reading,” demonstrates both deep historical understanding and interpretive skill. It is hard not to agree with Kucich that many examples of surface reading look familiar (72-3). In fact, they look suspiciously like historicism.

What, after all, constitutes the “surface” in surface reading: the surfaces of a text or the surfaces in a text? By positioning themselves in opposition to an existing hermeneutic, surface readers imply the former. For me, however, the freshness of the work springs from its attention to the latter--that is, from the object and not the mode of analysis. In this sense, a “surface” is no different in kind from an artifact of material culture, an image of the male body, a representation of working-class subjectivity, or a particular colonial space. As with any of these familiar objects of analysis, we can theorize how surfaces are described, ask what they conceal, or insist
that they conceal nothing. We can invent a whole new vocabulary for describing them, discuss their specificity, or argue for or against their political significance. We can certainly expound on their aesthetic value. The possibilities for new research are vast and exciting. Such surfaces do not, however, require us to turn our backs on our most trusted methodologies.

A potential exception is Heather Love, who enlists Bruno Latour’s *Reassembling the Social* (2005) to make one of the most passionate cases for a radical new methodology of surface. Love singles out a hidden humanism as the most pernicious aspect of the status quo: the “depth” in question is not only the hidden structures or ideologies that suspicious critics reveal, but more importantly, the perceived ethical dimension of literature that they produce when they attribute “life, richness, warmth, and voice to texts” (388). Turning to descriptive social science for inspiration, Love suggests that literary critics need to “develop modes of reading that are close but not deep” (375). By embracing pure description and eschewing critical interpretation, Love argues, this sociological method manages to free itself from the stifling, value-laden worldview of humanism.

To illustrate, Love takes a prized work in the humanist canon, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and “attend [s] to its use of description and its literalism” (383). But does such attention actually constitute a “renunciation of depth hermeneutics” (383)? Based on what Love does next, it seems unlikely. First, Love historicizes. She points out that Morrison got the idea for *Beloved* from a piece she read in a newspaper about the infanticide of Margaret Garner (384). Then she uses this contextual information to hypothesize that Morrison had a “documentary impulse” (384) and thus placed considerable value on “recording circumstances and actions with minimal intervention” (384). Morrison’s description of the climactic infanticide is Love’s case in point. After providing us with a formal analysis of the ambiguous point of view in this passage, Love
concludes with an interpretation of what Morrison’s style in that episode is intended to convey, arguing that it renders “dehumanization . . . as a technique, a material process, rather than an ideology” (386). The reading is convincing, well argued, and insightful, but the question of whether it avoids a hermeneutics of depth persists.

Morrison has stated in an interview that her novels are “not documentary” (466) and, in response to “sociological” literary criticism, has complained that when readers and critics approach the works of African American writers they always “weight it with some extra-literary criterion” (473). Love may be entirely justified in going against the author’s intentions by focusing on the “empirical, descriptive, or ‘merely sociological,’” but her doing so is certainly “suspicious.” It is also indicative of the fact that surface readings, like most forms of literary criticism, are shot through with subjective interpretation. In suggesting that by means of a single descriptive passage, “Morrison draws attention to what is irrecoverable in the historical record” (387), Love attributes a motive to the author, a secondary meaning to the prose, and an intellectual payoff to the insightful reader. All three claims require interpretive work that goes beyond mere description. Love thus exhibits a rather familiar give-and-take that ultimately uncovers “richness” and “warmth” in what might be seen as a relatively austere moment in Morrison’s writing (388). Indeed, she has given the surface a depth, given it—dare I suggest—a humanistic “message” about our ethically difficult relationship to “the historical record” (371, 387). Love, it seems to me, takes a worthwhile chance in focusing on the “documentary” aspects of Beloved, but the method is, nonetheless, familiar.

Yet, if the turn to surface is, to some extent, a familiar product in a new package, this new packaging does suggest that what is wanted from literary study and what is considered a desirable and fulfilling professional pursuit have shifted in the past two decades. If traditional
literary criticism took upon itself the responsibility to seek out and expose institutionalized repression, corruption, doublespeak, discrimination, violence, and bigotry, surface readers and the critical audience to whom they appeal seem to find this constant, societal self-questioning exhausting. The thought of laying down this responsibility, of embracing a more circumscribed responsibility, of accepting things as they appear rather than questioning those appearances, has become an enticing one.

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s introduction to the “The Way We Read Now” is a case in point. “Surface reading,” they write, “might easily be dismissed as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are.” The object, however, is to reclaim from the “utopian strain” of critics such as Fredric Jameson and Susan Sontag, the accent on immersion in texts (without the paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value), for we understand that attentiveness to the artwork as itself is a kind of freedom. . . . To some ears this might sound like a desire to be free from having a political agenda that determines in advance how we interpret texts, and in some respects it is exactly that. We think, however, that a true openness to all the potentials made available by texts is also prerequisite to an attentiveness that does not reduce them to instrumental means to an end and is the best way to say anything accurate and true about them. Criticism that valorizes the freedom of the critic has often assumed that an adversarial relation to the object of criticism is the only way for the critic to free himself from the text’s descriptive, ideological surface and uncover the truth that the text conceals. We want to suggest that, in relinquishing the freedom dream that accompanies the work of demystification, we might be groping toward some equally valuable, if less glamorous, states of mind (16-17).

In this passage, Best and Marcus have composed a masterpiece of litigious prose. Fit for the courtroom, it deftly preempts the defense’s counter-argument that surface reading is “politically quietist” and parries this blow, not by answering the charge directly, but through insinuating descriptions of what surface reading is not and, therefore, what traditional reading practices must be. Refusing to be clear about whom exactly comes in for attack shields Best and Marcus from anyone who might otherwise be offended by these insinuations or from anyone who claims to
know precisely whom they are talking about. Without knowing the enemy’s identity, we are asked to accept that they are “paranoid” and “suspicious,” that their insidious techniques are reducing the literature we love to an “instrumental means to an end.” Finally, Best and Marcus lead the defendant into a false dilemma. Suspicious reading, they argue, is egocentric. It basks in the “glamorous” glow of its own discernment. In order to refute the charge, however, the defendant must admit to his or her own suspicion and, thus, accept the ruling and take the rap.

My admittedly suspicious close reading of Best and Marcus’s call to arms is meant to bring out the emotionally charged and arguably reactionary side of the surface movement. Ironically, Best and Marcus’s adversarial tone toward suspicious readers, rather than being an example of suspicious reading at work, underwrites the claim that suspicious readers adopt an “adversarial” stance toward their objects of inquiry. The most challenging problem posed by surface reading may well be how one effectively engages this frustration. I begin to address this problem by performing a methodologically unremarkable reading of George Eliot’s *Romola*. By drawing a parallel between Romola’s disillusionment with Savonarola and surface readers’ disillusionment with suspicious reading, I enlist Eliot’s razor-sharp acumen in an effort to cut through this contemporary tangle. In doing so, I try, sympathetically, to take Eliot at her word, but I do not claim to be “just reading.” My admiration for Eliot may predispose me not to suspect her of any glaring symptom or ideological agenda; but even so, in trying to extrapolate from a Victorian historical novel to a recent critical debate I must necessarily read into the pages of *Romola*. Comparing the critical with the fictional also enables us to see more clearly just how escapist, how anti-self-conscious, the call for surface reading is.

One of the Victorians’ favorite critical practices was comparing the past and present. Eliot’s *Romola*, in which the politics of fifteenth-century Florence provide an evocative parallel
to those of nineteenth-century Britain and Italy, is a case in point.² Eliot meticulously portrays Savonarola’s brief but potent impact on Florence, from his role in establishing the puritanical Republic that interrupted the Medici family’s stronghold on Florentine politics, to his humiliating imprisonment and final execution after failing to carry out a trial by fire. However, since the text is not a documentary but a novel that focalizes subjective viewpoints, Eliot dramatizes a personal perspective on her subject by allowing the novel’s historical figures to converse with its fictional characters, most notably Savonarola and Romola.³ Thus, the reader’s final judgment of Savonarola largely depends on how he acquits himself in his personal relationships, and how he translates his political and spiritual convictions into daily practice. In other words, it is not so much Savonarola’s professed beliefs that come under question in this novel as his method for carrying them out.

An unbeliever at the opening of the novel, Romola becomes a devout Christian and one of the Frate’s most enthusiastic followers after a series of personal misfortunes lead her to seek solace in the charitable service promoted by his religious order. When the Republic charges Romola’s godfather with treason and sentences him to die, however, Romola begins to question her recent conversion. She reasons that according to his own teachings, Savonarola is out to intervene on behalf of the prisoners. He, however, sees things differently and tells her so:

Be thankful, my daughter, if your own soul has been spared perplexity; and judge not those to whom a harder lot has been given. You see one ground of action in this matter. I see many. I have to choose that which will further the work intrusted [sic] to me. The end I seek is one to which minor respects must be sacrificed. The death of five men—were they less guilty than these—is a light matter weighed against the withstanding of the vicious tyrannies which stifile the life of Italy and foster the corruption of the Church; a light matter weighed against the furthering of God’s kingdom upon earth, the end for which I live and am willing myself to die. (577-8)

Romola understandably bristles at Savonarola’s answer. Though he maintains the forms of sympathetic commiseration, his tone is patronizing. He prides himself on the magnitude of his
responsibilities. He claims that the wellbeing of “the Church” and “the life of Italy” depend upon his judgment and that he alone stands in the way of “vicious tyrannies.” Whether because of his religious ardor or his will to rhetorical mastery, Savonarola’s “utopian strain” unfairly implies that Romola opposes the cause in opposing the action, accusing her, in effect, of “political quietism” (Best and Marcus 16). This analogy should help us to see how the high political aspirations of some suspicious readers may sometimes put less suspicious readers in a similarly unfair position. Nevertheless, the accusation against Romola is not entirely unfounded. Under Savonarola’s guidance, “political reform” had become a “new interest in her life” (587), but now she is unready to deem the life of one man “a light matter” compared to “God’s kingdom upon earth,” much less the Republic. At this point at least, Romola desires “to be free from having a political agenda that determines in advance how [she] interprets,” not texts (Best and Marcus 16), but the meaning and significance of an individual human life.

Though it is easy to sympathize with Romola’s position and easy to be suspicious of Savonarola, Eliot’s subsequent psychologizing of her protagonist forces us to reserve our judgment of the charismatic friar. “Under any other circumstances,” the narrator explains, “Romola would have been sensitive to the appeal at the beginning of Savonarola’s speech; but at this moment she was so utterly in antagonism with him, that what he called perplexity seemed to her sophistry and doubleness” (578). Having herself suffered the perplexity of not knowing where her duty lies, Romola should sympathize with Savonarola’s position. However, her “antagonism” makes it impossible for her to listen without suspicion—not the suspicion that Savonarola is hiding some deep motive behind his pieties, but, rather, the suspicion that his pieties are superficial.
The final shoe drops when Savonarola, in the heat of the argument, declares, “The cause of my party is the cause of God’s kingdom” (578), and Romola retorts, “I do not believe it! . . . God’s kingdom is something wider—else, let me stand outside it with the beings that I love” (578). Though the spatial metaphors are mixed, I would argue that Romola’s “width” and Love’s “depth” refer to the same thing—the humanist valuation of the irreducible worth of an individual human life which, in Romola’s case, would seem to necessitate her Godfather’s pardon. With this similarity in mind, what happens to Romola next deserves our close attention. In the full “bitterness of her disappointment” in the Frate (587), Romola’s faith wavers and she reevaluates what seemed to her (in Love’s words) “rich, warm, [and] deep” (378) in “God’s kingdom.” Savonarola’s brand of Christianity and the value it seemed to place on human life now appears to her to be the attractive illusion of a conjuror’s trick. Where she once saw a deep love of humanity behind Savonarola’s “striving after the renovation of the Church and the world” (587), she now sees his professions as the “striving after a mere name” that tells “no more than the title of a book” (587). The title, of course, is both The Holy Bible and The Life and Adventures of Girolamo Savonarola, because, for her, they are one and the same. The values of Christianity have become indistinguishable from their human representative and they share in the shame of his hypocritical egoism. Her disillusionment takes the form not of seeing something behind the veil, but of seeing nothing behind it. Almost paradoxically, Romola’s disappointment in the Frate, her anger at realizing the shallowness of his words, destroys her belief in the very depth she accuses him of being without. Her insistence on surface is directly proportional to her previous insistence on depth. In other words, Romola’s “surface reading” of Savonarola’s “book” is a symptom of her disappointment in discovering that the Christian values professed by Savonarola
are insufficient to ensure justice. At least in Romola’s case, the swing from “depth” to “surface” is propelled by the frustration of deeply held political aspirations.

This swing and the painful ease with which Romola moves from losing her faith in Savonarola, to losing her faith in religion, and finally, to losing her faith in herself interests Eliot a great deal. With a sentence reminiscent of the opening of *Middlemarch* she launches into a meditation on the connection between faith in others and faith in ourselves:

No one who has ever known what it is thus to lose faith in a fellow-man whom he has profoundly loved and reverenced, will lightly say that the shock can leave the faith in the Invisible Goodness unshaken. With the sinking of high human trust, the dignity of life sinks too; we cease to believe in our own better self, since that also is part of the common nature which is degraded in our thought; and all the finer impulses of the soul are dulled. Had not she had her sorrows too? And few had cared for her, while she had cared for many. She had done enough; she had striven after the impossible, and was weary of this stifling crowded life. She longed for that repose in mere sensation. (587-8)

Once Romola loses faith in Savonarola, her own life begins to lose its capacity for meaning as well. That “better self,” those “finer impulses,” all those deep aspects of character (and a character) that we suspect are there, but the existence of which we cannot document, become impossible for Romola to perceive. Exhausted by the unremitting anguish that accompanies her loss of faith, she eventually collapses from the inside out till she becomes so depressed that she longs for a radically superficial existence. She yearns to “repose in mere sensation,” and obtaining a little boat, she pushes out in the sea to “to be freed from the burden of choice [now that] all motive was bruised” (587, 589). In other words, the self-questioning instigated by Romola’s sudden suspicion that there might not be as much to the Frate as she originally supposed, awakes in her a strong anti-self-conscious desire that Carlyle, Gaskell, and Brontë would have recognized readily. Romola doesn’t want to have to think. The experience of selfhood desired by Romola is strictly corporeal.
Romola’s desire to “repose in mere sensation” speaks to the recent critical interest in detachment, inattention, and impersonality, an interest which seems not unrelated to the nearly coeval critique of suspicion. Focusing on sensation alone, like sticking to the surface, represents a certain kind of discomfort with depth. So, it is not surprising that some opponents of suspicion are drawn to language that seems to privilege immediate experience over studied analysis. An early critic of depth hermeneutics, Susan Sontag insisted that what matters in art is its “pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy,” and she praised essays that manage to “reveal the sensuous surface . . . without mucking about in it” (9, 13). More recently, Felski has similarly privileged a work’s “ability to inspire intense responses, inchoate emotions, [and] quasi-visceral passions” (“After” 31). Even Anne Cheng’s “hermeneutics of susceptibility,” unusual among surface practices for its commitment to socio-political analysis, suggests a similar passivity. In so far as this hermeneutics is willing “to follow the wayward life of the subject and object in dynamic interface,” it could be figuratively illustrated with Romola’s boat unresistingly following the wayward current (101-102). In and of itself, the similar rhetoric, of course, means very little. After all, Felski and Sontag emphasize the pleasures, even the “erotics” (Sontag 14) of opening ourselves to the full sensory experience of art and suggest that by doing so we pursue an ethics akin to the very humanism Romola tries to escape. Cheng is hardly interested in giving up on politics. And yet, despite these important distinctions, the overlapping language of passivity and sensation should give us pause, for much of the very best in literary and historical scholarship arises out of such unlikely, but suspicious, correspondences. Pursuing these suggestive possibilities is one way of allowing the past to inform the present.

In this particular case, attending to the correspondence requires that we ask whether surface reading constitutes not only a disagreement with a certain “theoretical conviction,” but a
weariness with the self-conscious struggles that attend all honest attempts at spiritual, intellectual, or political certitude (587). Even if this were so, it would not negate the very real political frustration, if not outright despair, that often haunts critiques of suspicion. Romola longs to “repose in mere sensation” because she can’t bear laboring on behalf of a moral code that could execute her godfather. I hear a similar sentiment in Eve Sedgwick’s discomforting question, “Why bother exposing the ruses of power in a country where, at any given moment, 40 percent of young black men are enmeshed in the penal system?” (140). I hear it also in Best and Marcus’s pained testimony that they find our “demystifying protocols superfluous in an era when images of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere were immediately circulated on the internet” and “the real-time coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed in ways that required little explication the state’s abandonment of its African American citizens” (2). Do these statements indicate a disillusionment borne of critical exhaustion and, if so, are they as self-destructive as Romola’s ethical languor threatens to be when she pushes off in the unseaworthy vessel?

According to Christopher Nealon’s diagnosis, since the 1970s, the humanities have been in “a kind of manic-depressive readerly situation, where we are invited to read according to whether postproletarian social movements—multicultural, antiglobalizing—are failures awaiting redemption, or upsurges of irrepressible creativity” (42). With the world hanging in the balance every time we read, he speculates, periodic bouts of despair become inevitable. There can be no rest while the “revolution remains the limit-horizon against which we measure literary dreaming” (48). Nealon’s psychological assessment of the situation seems to me of the utmost importance in working through the call for surface, suggesting as it does that the source of frustration is not located in the method but in the apparent disconnect between what critical theory continues to promise and what the world news continues to belie. Surface readers have interpreted this
disconnect as a failure on the part of their own mentors, a previous generation of critics who seem to have failed to live up to their own lofty expectations, and have accordingly turned their backs on these later-born Savonarolas.

Placing political hopelessness at the center of these critical interventions helps to sort through the many variations and inconsistencies that can make it difficult to formulate a systematic response to the anti-suspicion movement in its entirety. For example, Brigid Lowe’s *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (2007) at first seems a case in point for Nealon’s analysis. Her project, she claims, grew out of an emotional reaction against the alienating egotism of leftwing politics and was driven by a fear that if she dared to study literature for “some particular merit” (4), suspicious readers would implicate her in a “reviled ‘middle-class construction of reality’” (4). Yet unlike the anti-humanistic Love, Lowe makes clear that her critique of critique is not directed at “liberal humanism” but, rather, “against the creeping solipsism and self-righteousness that seems to…threaten the future of political critique in the humanities” (4). What the humanistic Lowe and the anti-humanistic Love can agree upon is taking umbrage at the egoism of socially and politically minded literary suspicious critique. Indeed, depreciative portraits of the critic’s character are, perhaps, the single most recurrent feature in an otherwise protean critical phenomenon. Critical “solipsism and self-righteousness” make Lowe’s flesh creep (4). Love cringes at a critic’s “ethical heroism” (Love 381). Best and Marcus warn us about a “glamorous” mindset (17) that Felski describes as “a sense of prowess” (“After” 33). Mary Thomas Crane sees a “heroic agency” in “bring[ing] to light meaning that has been hidden from everyone else” (83), and Margaret Cohen champions “modesty” and “humility before the vastness of the task and a retreat from totalizing ambitions” (61). Exhausted by the ever-mounting size of leftwing
ambition, Nealon recommends that we give up on political activism and accept that “we are best trained in the custodial job of maintaining and arranging texts” (48). It’s almost as if each of us is being asked, at least when we are being critics, to “cease to believe in our own better self” (Eliot, *Romola* 588).

The accusation of egomania is, perhaps, good news for more traditional literary critics because it suggests that it is not the methods *per se* that irk surface readers, but the political attitudes and adversarial affects surface readers *associate* with the depth hermeneutics such critics employ. Whether the self-satisfied air comes across in a conviction that interpretation articulates the ineffable value of literature (Love), in the hope that exposing injustice in cultural texts can effect political change (Nealon), or in the certainty that those who appreciate literature must be political naïfs (Lowe), the reaction is the same. Still, the humbling rhetoric and demands for methodological penance strike me as a potential threat. Like Kucich, I worry that despite Best and Marcus’s assurances, “political quietism” looms over any critical future dominated by surface reading. If in such a future we seriously adopt the new “custodial job of maintaining and arranging texts” (48), I worry that the reaction of our colleges and universities could spell disciplinary suicide. Anti-self-conscious desire, as we have seen in the previous chapters, often comes perilously close to a death wish.

While she is living in a city beset by political intrigue and doctrinal disputes, Romola is unable to achieve the emotional and intellectual clarity necessary for identifying “the cause of God’s Kingdom,” and her world contracts to fit her limited new perspective. When her little boat miraculously washes up on the shores of a village decimated by the plague, however, she finds it much easier to recognize her calling in tending to the sick and dying townspeople. Romola, like Gaskell, finds respite from her morbid self-consciousness in doing the duty that lies nearest. And
yet, while her sojourn creates the conditions necessary for Romola’s spiritual rebirth and adds to the narrative’s satisfying upward trajectory, Eliot does not suffer the plot to leave behind in its many windings the abstract ethical conflict that sent Romola to the boat in the first place. Interestingly enough, egoism proves to be the sticking point: “In that declaration of his, that the cause of his party was the cause of God’s kingdom, [Romola] heard only the ring of egoism” (587). The Frate’s words are drowned out by the tone of their delivery. Egoism is always unappealing, but Eliot refuses to let her reader dismiss Savonarola’s assertion as easily as does her heroine. Her narrator continues:

Perhaps such words have rarely been uttered without that meaner ring of egoism; yet they are the implicit formula of all energetic belief. And if often in danger of becoming a demon-worship, in which the votary lets his son and daughter pass through the fire with a readiness that hardly looks like sacrifice; tender fellow-feeling for the nearest has its danger too, and is apt to be timid and sceptical towards the larger aims without which life cannot rise into religion (587)

Even while confirming Romola’s perception of an offensive “ring” in the Frate’s voice, the narrator speculates that egoism may actually be a prerequisite for all meaningful and inspired action. The very “formula” of “energetic belief” underwrites the egotistical conviction that “my party is the cause of God’s kingdom,” or in less sacred terms, that “my party is the cause of right.” No individual can relentlessly labor toward “larger aims,” nor can life “rise into religion,” without the obligatory narcissism of believing oneself right.

If the sacrosanct language in this passage reminds us of Love’s description of the literary critic “interpreting divine messages” with “ethical heroism” (381), Eliot’s largely secular viewpoint should make us wary of throwing out her message with her divine metaphor. It is easy to suspect egoism and trust humility, just as it is easy to reject doubleness in favor of the clearly straightforward. Romola, however, exposes the problematic nature of humility as a critical position from which to engage one’s object whether it is a literary text, historical practice, or
one’s community. To retreat into the secure vocations of the honest recorder, the unassuming custodian, or passive reader is to perpetually defer hazarding the dangerous—but sometimes necessary—position that “my party is the cause of right.” Thus, it is not so much the political quietism of anti-suspicious arguments that disconcerts me; indeed, I am suggesting that a deep-seated political disappointment fuels the intervention. What concerns me most is the preoccupation with humility, for I worry that if we repress our suspicious egoism and cultivate more retiring mindsets, we will slowly resign ourselves to seeing things only as they are and not also as they ought to be.

Of course, anti-self-conscious desire, if born out of a morbid self-conscious questioning of what is often leads to an equally problematic, escapist fantasizing about what ought to be. In fact, when the Frate declares that his “party is the cause of right,” he sounds like no Victorian quite so much as Carlyle. To keep from turning in upon itself, the mind must choose a direction and move forward, but because self questioning ends with a decision and not with a truth, this direction is always suspect, always up for a renewed interrogation, and if we are to avoid the myopia of Savonarola we must, periodically, turn the critical eye inward. But if we are to avoid the self-defeatism of Romola and, I would add, surface reading, we must at times, like Carlyle “do the duty which lies nearest” (Sartor 148), like Gaskell determine “some appointed work to do” (107), and perhaps most importantly, like Brontë, always “leave sunny imaginations hope” (496).

When we want a novel to help us think about our work of literary analysis, it is always pleasant to come across an actual scene of reading. Eliot doesn’t let us down. When Romola returns to Florence, she eagerly obtains a copy of Savonarola’s printed confessions. Though but a hostile reworking of the trial riddled with inaccuracies and invention, Eliot, nevertheless,
privileges the printed word, and Romola “read[s] this evidence again and again” with the hope of “judg[ing] it by some clearer light than the contradictory impressions that were taking the form of assertions in the mouths of both partisans and enemies” (660). Romola turns to the confession because she can read it alone, over and over, and because it is almost always easier to work through alien thinking when we encounter it in private and on the page, without the heightened emotionalism and ephemerality of live dialogue. The manufactured distance of print enables Romola to adjust her feelings as she prepares to reconsider Savonarola’s rectitude. Though she cannot help but bring “to her long meditations over that printed document many painful observations . . . which whispered a presentiment” of Savonarola’s guilt, she refuses to let her suspicions guide her interpretation. Rather, she consults her sympathy and listens as “her soul crie[s] out for some explanation of his lapses which would make it still possible for her to believe that the main striving of his life had been pure and grand” (663).

Romola’s reading is, as Sedgwick might say, “reparative,” in that “it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object” (149). She desires to acquit Savonarola in her own mind if such an acquittal is possible and to begin to repair the broken trust between them. It is her desire for sympathetic reparation that refuses to let her take the document at face value, that leads her to read between the lines in hope of discovering, detecting, uncovering, or otherwise revealing some hidden evidence of Savonarola’s innocence. Sympathy infuses Romola’s suspicion. Indeed, the two dispositions are often methodologically indistinguishable. Sympathy can point us to new objects of suspicion just as suspicion can uncover new objects of sympathy.

The twinned relationship of suspicion and sympathy reminds us that once we begin to interrogate the self, to be conscious of our own thoughts, we cannot permanently check the urge, theoretically captured in the deconstructive impulse, to think and re-think what we do and why
we do it. And yet, somehow, we must let the accumulation of self-knowledge, halting and imperfect though it may be, provide a healing resource for the current bout of methodological unease. The language of humility that accompanies so many of the calls for alternatives to suspicion is both too self-conscious and not self-conscious enough. What we need, and what I have tried to accomplish in this dissertation, is a method and a mindset capable of probing the depths of literary escapism without becoming critically escapist.

In an early essay on Carlyle, Eliot gives us an idea of what a sympathetic suspicion might entail when she humorously describes the peculiar power of Carlyle’s writing:

> When saying the very opposite of what we think, he says it so finely, with so hearty conviction—he makes the object about which we differ stand out in such grand relief under the clear light of his strong and honest intellect—he appeals so constantly to our sense of the manly and the truthful—that we are obliged to say ‘Hear! hear!’ to the writer before we can give the decorous ‘Oh! oh!’ to his opinions” (312)

Eliot questions the compatibility of “theoretical conviction” and “personal tenderness” in *Romola*, but her essay on Carlyle proves that, at least in literary criticism, the two can productively coexist (*Romola* 587). Victorian Studies does not necessarily need to repudiate the hermeneutics of suspicion in order to take a page from Eliot’s books and always sympathize. In short, we may say, “Hear! hear!” to the sincerity of feeling that motivates the surface reader’s appeal and yet cry, “Oh! Oh!” at their rhetoric of humility and the defeatist politics that it entails.
Notes

1 A version of this chapter has been previously published in Victorian Studies under the title “Always Sympathize! Surface Reading, Affect, and George Eliot’s Romola.
2 On Eliot’s historical methods in relation to Florentine and Victorian politics see, e.g., Henry, Malachuk, Villa, and Wihl.
3 See Kurnick, “Abstraction” for discussion of how interaction with Savonarola affects the Romola’s ontological position as a character (491-2).
4 Ablow has speculated that the current critical interest in impersonality, detachment, and reader experience represents a response to suspicious reading that is analogous to, but distinct from, the turn to surface. Where surface readers attempt to circumvent suspicious practices by eschewing interpretation in favor of more descriptive modes of analysis, critics working on these topics remain committed to interpretive practices while redirecting their focus from traditional subjects such as character and plot to the diegetic and extra-diegetic experiential states associated with reading (Q&A). For detachment and reader experience see Ablow, Feeling; Arata; Dames, “On Hegel;” Farina; Greiner; Kurnick, “Erotics;” and Plotz. For impersonality see Andrew Miller and D. A. Miller.
5 For how these two modes of thought line up with theories of liberalism in Britain see Wihl.
Works Cited


