

STRANGE SIGHT IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH NOVEL

by

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### Abstract

Two technologies in the nineteenth-century drastically altered how the English saw and conceptualized reality: photography and the realist novel. Both pretended to capture an unmediated, totalizing representation, yet both were also heavily manipulated to produce particular effects and interrogate the idea of objectivity. This dissertation tracks the development of the nineteenth-century realist novel in England not through its claims to representational mimesis, but rather through its ubiquitous visual strangeness. I examine puzzling visual encounters in touchstone English novels to argue that rather than representing the world in its putative social, psychological, and historical completeness, realist novelists integrate visual strangeness into their fictions to mark the rupture and illogic existent within perceptual reality. Using psychoanalytic theories of intersubjectivity with visual culture studies, I suggest these moments are not aberrations within realism, but are essential to the development of the form. They reveal the English novel is largely *about* how empirical approaches to knowledge come up against the problem of subjectivity. These unassimilable, eruptive textual moments of “strange sight” reckon with difference, stage encounter, and express disillusionment with the notion that the visual can fully and cogently signify; however, they also liberate realism from merely descriptive accounts of “things as they are” and generate alternative, imaginative forms of being and knowing that are not beholden to normative epistemologies.

## Introduction

The nineteenth-century eye was, discursively, a queer organ. While there was a strong effort in the era to understand how it worked physiologically, how it related to processes of mind, and the extent to which it accessed objective truth, the eye escaped codification. Sight was epistemologically illuminating and mystifying, and there was no shortage of speculation about its authority. In the midst of this speculation, though, was a deep pleasure taken in its obscurity that stimulated experimentation in art and literature. John Ruskin's defense of the impressionistic J.M.W. Turner, who he professed had the keenest eye of the Victorian art world precisely because the haziness of his paintings rejected the precision of classical training, illustrates this:

Now what I particularly wish to insist upon, is the state of vision in which all the details of an object are seen, and yet seen in such confusion and disorder that we cannot in the least tell what they are, or what they mean. It is not mist between us and the object, still less it is shade, still less it is want of character; it is a confusion, a mystery, an interfering of undecided lines with each other . . . it is no cold and vacant mass, it is full and rich and abundant, and yet you cannot see a single form so as to know what it is. (26-27)

Rather than representing figures or landscapes clearly on canvas, Turner's paintings are "full" of impression and meaning because they make visual and epistemological mastery impossible.

Their indeterminacy creates a type of visual experience new to the nineteenth-century art world, in which there is "not one atom in its whole extent and mass which does not suggest more than it represents; nor does it suggest vaguely . . . but yet, clearly and fully as the idea is formed, just so much of it is given, and no more, as nature would have allowed us to feel or see" (31). In Ruskin's terms, perceptual partiality *is* reality; he imagines the existence of a totalizing vision

binding the elements of the painting together so that they communicate a singular impression forcefully, but the viewer's experience of that totality can only ever be fractional, as it must be accessed through an imperfect eye.

Several technologies mediated the period's ocularcentrism, suggesting a multiplicity of available perspectives that simultaneously underscored the importance of sight and attenuated any one vision's reliability. With the invention of photography, magic lanterns, stereoscopes, panoramas, and the first Great Exhibition, Victorians were at once fascinated by the rich visual world they were newly privy to and skeptical that the new visions presented to them reflected reality. As Kate Flint writes,

problematizing vision meant a great deal more than a consideration of the conceptual and mechanical implications of these means of seeing. It involved acknowledging the individualism involved in perception, both the individualism of consciously evoked social knowledge and experience, and of factors of memory and association which belonged to the increasingly investigated world of the unconscious. (*The Victorians* 311)

Questions of vision in the era, then, are loaded with implications about the self, society, mind, ideality, reality, progress, failure, limitation, and so on. Its importance to how the Victorians understood themselves cannot be overstated.

As an aesthetic mode grounded in the lived experience of everyday life, passages narrating intense visual experience are abundant in literary realism. Realism builds verisimilitude through perspectivalism. Though the realist novel gestures to omniscience by using (usually) disembodied and abstracted narration, like Turner's painting, it is often in the idiosyncratic particularities and occasional misrecognitions that realism gains its closeness to what feels like

reality. Despite realism's emergence "in the ferment of scientific and positivist thinking which . . . denied that there was a reality of essences or forms which was not accessible to ordinary sense perception," literary realism more often complicates vision as the primary way of understanding the world, the self, and social life (Becker 6). As visual experience increasingly became a key method of understanding *and* an ever-shifting terrain of knowledge-making, nineteenth-century writers registered this instability through experimentations with perception that became a standard of realist form.

The following chapters examine puzzling visual encounters, exchanges, and experiences in touchstone realist novels to argue that rather than representing the world in its putative social, psychological, and historical completeness, novelists integrate visual strangeness into their fictions to mark the rupture and illogic existent within perceptual reality. There are particular narrative strategies that characterize this strangeness: shifts in temporality, suspended plot, heightened bodily responsiveness, free indirect style, and metaphorical language. This trope will be called, for the sake of isolating its unique uses in literary realism, "strange sight." In depicting that which is unassimilable to a positivist and easily observable definition of "the real," passages depicting strange sight invite deeper consideration into the structures of daily life that do not fit mimetic representation. The following passages of visual arrest and ambiguity reckon with difference, stage encounter, and often express discomfort with the failure of the visual to fully and cogently signify. While the realists of this study use strange sight for distinct purposes, each instance in some way challenges the contours of the "real" and negotiates multiple ways of knowing.

After Michel Foucault, it is difficult to discuss vision without mentioning its harms: panoptic surveillance, the gaze, the maintenance of oppression and hegemony, and the policing

of the self and other are common critical approaches to sight in fiction. Foucault even invokes one function of the realist detail when he writes in *Discipline and Punish* of “the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life” (197-8). The repressive and coercive aspects of looking within a social body explain particular ways of looking, but diminish the imaginative, searching, and potentially radical forms that vision can take in fiction. The sense that Victorian realism reproduces hegemony without engaging in its own dialectic relies on a false “binary” between, as Jonathan Crary points out, “realism and experimentation” (4). In this formulation, “the essential continuity of mimetic codes is a necessary condition for the affirmation of an avant-garde breakthrough,” a periodization that suggests there is no modernist radicalism without its straw man, the oppressive mundanity of realism. But “experimentation” in modernism often boils down to “the presence of a subject with a detached viewpoint,” and Crary’s influential study proves that nineteenth-century perceptual models increasingly made the observer the center of visual experience.

Beginning with the camera obscura, “without question the most widely used model for explaining human vision, and for representing the relation of a perceiver and the position of a knowing subject to an external world,” Crary unpacks the various ways that visual apparatuses reveal more complex, fluid understandings of sight and subjectivity (27). The camera obscura transitioned from a mediator “between God and the world,” reflecting an external reality apart from the observer, to something that by 1703 was thought of as a technology itself mediating and “structuring” vision (48, 51). Theories of vision developed to make the human body “the active producer of optical experience” (69) by aligning the optic with the haptic, which Jonathan Crary links to the introduction of new technologies like the stereoscope (62). While the camera obscura existed as a model for a rationalist world, the pace of industrial, technological, and social change

in the nineteenth century increasingly made visual experience individualistic and subjective. The authority of vision was relocated in the seer, not in the thing seen, a development Crary links to modernity.

As knowledge about the eye reconfigured sight from an external phenomenon to a subjective experience, Chris Otter posits that the history of vision in the nineteenth century can be read as a history of liberal individualism. Tracing the development of light technologies, Otter shows how the movement of illumination from private to public spaces influenced self-governance, normalized corrected vision, and bolstered a “slow social diffusion of attentive modes of world reading” (50). In depicting how Victorians sought to train and systematize sight, Otter appears to celebrate liberalism as a progressive feature of modernity, frequently linking it to a project of “civilization” and “modernity” treated as desired ends (1). But the eye also proved to be unruly in some cited instances; F.C. Donders’s *On the Accommodation and Refraction of the Eye* shows that the eye can independently produce its own spectral traces of objects once viewed that linger in the perceptual field, as well as “floaters,” small, dark dots produced in the jelly of the eye. “[H]ere was palpable proof,” Otter writes, “of the bodily thickness of perception, the confusing, chiasmatic hinterland between demonstrably inner and outer worlds” (30). Narrated sight similarly exists at the threshold of internal experience and external materiality. It is multiple and various, and writers acknowledged this multiplicity: its hegemonic power, its subjective authority and inexactness, and its escape from normalizing forces to see something anew.

One of the most transformative technologies of the period that radically affected how vision allied to perceptual reality was photography. After the first photograph was taken in the 1820s by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, photography, or “light writing,” was considered: a record of

reality, replicating in miniature objective phenomena; an entirely different kind of sight, drawing forth objects otherwise unnoticed by the human eye; a method of interacting with spiritual and supernatural phenomenon; a fun, cheap way of replicating images used for entertainment purposes; and a deceptive tool that tricked viewers into believing a manipulated image was real. It developed a reputation for delivering insights into material reality *and* flourished as a form of fictionalization. Referencing the composite photography of Henry Peach Robinson and Oscar Gustav Rejlander, Daniel A. Novak indicates that many photographs were not whole images of reality at all, but fragments artfully pieced together for thematic and aesthetic purposes. In another key example of photography's relationship to fabrication, the dreamy portraits taken by Julia Margaret Cameron, an innovator of art photography, sought to create a mood rather than capture an image as it is seen by the naked eye. Sigmund Freud later used photography as a metaphor for theorizing the unconscious and the condensation of the dreamwork, and Walter Benjamin submits that the while "[t]he painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web" (233), thereby "introduc[ing] us to unconscious optics" (237) at work in the process of looking. What began as a documentary replication of a visual surface quickly became a method and metaphor for exploring psychological depths.

The same can be said for the nineteenth-century realist novel, a technology of vision in its own right often analyzed alongside photography.<sup>1</sup> Realism, too, "penetrates deeply" into character interiority and possesses sweeping panoramic views of English scenes, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Armstrong proposes that the photograph and the novel were co-constitutive media building a sense of the realistic through a repertoire of "object-images" that signified reality. This archive then delivered certain identities or a sense of objectivity back to actual bodies based on image typing—particularly for those that were othered racially, criminalized, or feminine. See *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*, discussed further in chapter three.

narrational movement between two (or more) perspectives encourages looking at things multiply, through subjective and detached, seemingly omniscient eyes. Eric Auerbach's critical tome on realism, *Mimesis*, looks at the special forms of realistic representation—the temporalities, psychological complexities, and the sense of an unstable social order—to remark that throughout Western civilization, the narration of human life develops so that everydayness increasingly belongs to a “world-historical context” (*Mimesis* 156). This “context,” when read closely and across various social strata, reveals both what is “universally valid” and what is “in a constant state of development” (444). Building on this theory, his essay on *Madame Bovary*, entitled “On the Serious Imitation of the Everyday,” describes the importance of the visual to realism:

Nothing happens, but this nothing has become a heavy, dull, threatening something . . . . *Purely out of images*—shaping the nothingness of the indifferent everyday into a weighty circumstance or aversion, of barrenness, of false hopes, crippling disappointments and pitiful anxieties—a grey and randomly chosen human life glides sluggishly towards its end. (429, emphasis added)

Making the material of the everyday specific for Auerbach involves coloring material life over with subjective insights through language. Emma Bovary's reality is identified as belonging to her, intimately and alone; no other sees the material of the everyday world as she does. This magic is created through her particular language and circumstance, at times leading to a “foolish failure to recognize the actual situation . . . [which] consists in every individual's replacement of his or her given reality with a world of appearances, made up of illusions” (430). In this way, realism comes not from accessing an actually-existing objective reality—though his use of “actual situation” suggests such a thing might exist—but in creating through language a

recognizable and plausible *subjective* experience of everydayness that is often grounded in partial perception.

Jose Ortega y Gasset uses similar language in his discussion of the novel: “For us the real is the perceptible, what our eyes and ears pour into us. We have been brought up by a spiteful age which has beaten the universe into a sheet and made of it a surface, a mere appearance. When we look for reality we search for appearances” (276). In what unfolds as a critique of the nineteenth-century novel’s tendency to deflate protagonists’ desires as they adjust to their circumstances, Ortega y Gasset argues that what counts as reality in fiction is nothing more than “submission and renunciation” (293). Both Auerbach and Ortega y Gasset, pioneers of novel studies, argue that the representation of everyday life is fundamentally an illusion rather than a record, a way of shaping a world according to the power of individual perception. Both see this happening in the visual realm, and the nineteenth-century’s burgeoning middle class made possible by industrial, liberal capitalism provided a perfect site for “a change in the imitative practice of art” as a result of “a change in human self-perception and . . . in the human itself” (Auerbach, “On the Serious” 435).

Auerbach is part of a chorus of voices seeking to identify the conventions of fiction that create something deemed realistic. These definitions are unsteady, morphing according to social and critical currents. Most agree that realism depicts narratives of common, often domestic, life, with complications resulting from social and political systems in which a distinct individual is enmeshed, policed, and influenced.<sup>2</sup> Writing in the midst of a realist renaissance, G.W. Lewes argues that realism depicts the “deflation of ambition and passion, its antiheroism, its tendency to see all people and things within large containing social organizations and, hence, its apparently

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<sup>2</sup> I echo two classic studies of the nineteenth century novel, Georg Lukács’s *The Theory of the Novel* and Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*.

digressive preoccupation with surfaces, things, particularities, social manners” (qtd. in Levine 15). Ian Watt emphasizes the empirical underpinnings of realism, concluding it is less a matter of content and more a formal difference: “the novel’s realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it” (11). Watt explains the novel’s “exhaustive presentation” of detail and sensation (30), and its “assessment,” a term he uses to articulate the novel’s role in inculcating “responsible wisdom about human affairs” (288).

Roland Barthes similarly finds realism in its formal details, identifying “the reality effect” (229) through an analysis of a barometer in *Madame Bovary*. He concludes that the extraneous clutter of detail creates the formal conditions of realism, not a mimetic reproduction of material reality or a particular individualistic narrative. The barometer does not refer to an actually existing object, but functions more abstractly as a referent to the idea of “reality” (“The Reality”). Naomi Schor later considers how the detail, with its ties to “*ornamental*” description and “*everyday*” domestic life, is “doubly gendered as feminine” (4, emphasis in original). She references also the importance of Freud in elevating the detail to a loaded signifier; “[i]t is the theory of displacement . . . that makes intelligible and, more important, legitimate the multiple modes of investment in the trivial everywhere at work in modern society” (6).

Taking a more visual approach, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues that realism naturally follows Renaissance humanism in constructing a fixed spectator position, which in turn creates consensus about the measurement of time and space belonging to objective reality. Realist novels formalize “the consensus among possible views [which] homogenizes the medium of perception and unifies the field perceived; it literally creates a common horizon” (*Realism* 21). A veteran theorist of realism, Fredric Jameson’s most recent contribution to the field defines realism according to its conflicting temporalities. He argues for an emergence of “the real” at the

juncture of past-tense *récit*, narrating “irrevocable” history, and the present-tense of affective bodily experience (*The Antinomies* 24). In a previous piece on the subject, Jameson’s “The Realist Floorplan” takes a spatializing approach to suggest that realist novels rebuild public and psychological space in the era of industrialism. Following Jameson’s lead, more recently, Anna Kornbluh agrees in “The Realist Blueprint” that the realist novel structures space, but also assumes its “encounter with totality *as a problem*” (Kornbluh 207). Ultimately, Kornbluh leads us to the enabling claim that “[r]ealism’s experimentation with omniscience and its limits, focalization and its curtailments, the free indirection of discourse and the impersonality of the person, affirms that consciousness itself is spatial and there is no steady point of view for relations” (209). Amanda Claybaugh adds that Anglo-American realism, in particular, focused on formulating social change that was “gradual and limited, to be reformist rather than revolutionary” (41). It was not designed to overthrow social institutions but to transform them from within, and “[a]s a consequence, they thought of novels not as self-contained aesthetic objects but rather as active interventions into social and political life . . . seeking to remake the world that it was also seeking to represent” (36).

This reformist impulse can be found in the realist novel’s concern with sympathy and morality. Thomas Carlyle, who coined the term “visuality” in 1841, remarks that a writer who produces “clear visuality . . . could not have discerned the object at all, or seen the vital type of it, unless he had, what we may call, *sympathised* with it” (67-68, emphasis in original). In Carlyle’s estimation, “clear visuality” indicates one “who *sees* the essential point . . . he discern[s] the true *likeness*, not the false superficial one” (68), hanging moral righteousness and creative sensitivity on a visual capacity. On the point of sympathy, George Eliot writes in her mid-novel break from the plot of *Adam Bede* that she aims to aestheticize, without falsifying,

“monotonous homely existence” (223) because art bestows “honour and reverence” to its subjects (224). Along with edification, the aim of art, she declares, is to “let us love that other beauty too, which lies . . . in the secret of deep human sympathy . . . do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands.” Eliot attaches artistic vision and mimesis—her imaginative “mirror” — to a “faithful account” of what can be witnessed visually (221). While recognizing that this mirror “is doubtless defective” because it issues from a single consciousness, Eliot’s vision of realism is primarily an effort to elevate sympathy and care, creating a more compassionate world rather than passively reproducing social difference.

Realism cannot come too close to utopianism, however, as the noted narrative tensions between an individual desiring consciousness and the external, structural forces that limit that desire has led to the nineteenth-century realist novel’s characterization as a restrictive and conservative ideological form. Despite singular, memorable characters and the occasional radical plot twist, critics often claim that the realist novel above all endorses—actively or passively—bourgeois liberalism under capitalism. Audrey Jaffe writes that rather than reproducing an already-given world, realist fiction “renders the real itself an object of desire” by constructing spatial inclusions and exclusions (12). Jaffe’s argument extends Jameson’s “The Realist Floorplan” in this way, concluding that

in exchange for our acceptance of [the novel’s] mediations and prohibitions, both of these—the world of the novel, and the world of public and private spaces the novel seeks to represent—offer what have long been understood as the particular pleasures of realist reading, including the coherence of social space and of the reader’s identity as that identity is situated and structured by it. (*The Victorian* 25)

Consumers of realist fiction look to reproductions of everyday life, knowing of their fictionality all along, because they create a holistic image of a world that can be known. These shaping mechanisms are beholden to social and ideological norms that are replicated in the reader's desire for them. In its inherited linkages to instructional pamphlets, Nancy Armstrong shows how the novel develops to enforce desirable gendered subjectivities. The history of the novel is likewise a history of sexuality producing an essentially gendered individual constructed through "twin powers of supervision and information control" (*Desire* 43). In another Foucauldian analysis, D.A. Miller charges the nineteenth-century novel with creating particular subjects advantageous to ideological regimes of power: "perhaps no openly fictional form has ever sought to 'make a difference' in the world more than the Victorian novel, whose cultural hegemony and diffusion well qualified it to become the primary spiritual exercise of an entire age" (*The Novel* x).<sup>3</sup>

Each theory of realism—and I have included only a small sampling—presents clear evidence of its viability, suggesting that realism is not any one thing at all, but rather, as Peter Demetz surmises, a "syndrome" of various "features" that

have no necessary relation to one another. On the contrary, these features were independently developed by various novelists and then imitated by other novelists in turn; it was only through these imitations that a largely accidental conglomeration became recognizable as a single mode. (qtd. in Claybaugh 44)

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<sup>3</sup> Miller considers sensation novels alongside realist texts, but the nineteenth-century novel has been so often conflated with literary realism that the two are often used interchangeably in criticism. Peter Brooks notes, "Once a radical gesture, breaking with tradition, realism becomes so much the expected mode of the novel that even today we tend to think of it as the norm from which other modes--magical realism, science fiction, fantasy, metafiction--are variants or deviants" (*Realist* 5).

Few writers in the nineteenth century declared an allegiance to realism—with George Eliot a notable exception—but their novels reveal patterns that allow for aesthetic grouping afterward.

In some ways, realism is defined by what it is not, an anti-genre contaminated by other genre fictions. Realism is the predominant literary aesthetic attached to the nineteenth-century novel, but one cannot open a Dickens, Eliot, or Austen novel without seeing glimmers of the Gothic, the sentimental, the tragicomic, the conduct manual, the silver fork novel, or the philosophical tract. Realism's conventions necessarily adapt with time. What might appear as realistic at one time will inevitably become stale with reuse, requiring a change to the form or an ironic imitation, exposing what was once an "imperceptible" convention as just another technique of illusion (Claybaugh 37).

Because the realist novel is a veritable smorgasbord of approaches and perspectives, novelists' uses of strange sight functions singularly in each iteration. My intention in investigating the use of strange sight is not to totalize what is an untotalizable, but regularly occurring, pattern in these fictions; rather, I take each novel on its own terms, building a case for strange sight as a constitutive formal and thematic element of realism. The visual(izable) world was changing rapidly, and so was the realist novel, creating a sense of foreignness, unreliability, and unknowability. The realist novel's plurality of perspectives stages a dialectical situation that puts ethical and epistemological questions in play, as conflicting subjectivities and temporalities are forced into tension with one another. In its entanglement of multiple voices, free indirect style—a unique contribution the novel makes to literary form—creates ironic tension between the perceptions delivered by an (often) abstract voice of narration and the embodied perspective of a character.

Nearly every major realist novelist writes passages of defamiliarizing, unsettling, and downright painful vision, yet this particular narrative trope has been undertheorized as a way of analyzing the questions and experiences realist representation explores. To ground this investigation, I selected touchstone novels of English realism by Jane Austen, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot. Each writer influenced the development of realism in unique ways, and their uses of strange sight differ accordingly. But just as the realist novel presents limited, partial views interacting with one another, “strange sight” cannot explain how vision functions in *every* realist novel ever written. Rather, it provides an interpretive lens—pun intended, as so much of our literary critical language remains wedded to vision—through which we might view these novelists’ representational and epistemological questions as they are staged through sight.

Chapter one reads Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* in conversation with feminist psychoanalytic theories of intersubjectivity, arguing that the novel dissolves the master’s gaze, dominant in heterosexual romance plots, to propose a visual relation that refrains from psychically colonizing the other. Austen embraces a feminist ethics of sight, which I examine through Kaja Silverman’s theory of the “look” and Luce Irigaray’s “intersubjective return.” The novel challenges inherited forms of patriarchal vision, adopted by *both* Darcy and Elizabeth, and the eye’s re-education in passages of lush visuality rejects the rigid systemization of visual experience that reproduces this gaze, promoting instead a provisional, fluid, and potentially unknowable visual relation.

While Austen’s novel offers a visual relation that levels the power of the master, William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* upholds an imperialist vision by flattening its few black characters into illustrated caricatures purely for comedic effect. Thackeray’s destabilized ethics

are often considered methods for ironic, and even critical, treatment of imperial power. Enabled by the theories of W.J.T. Mitchell and Edward Said, however, chapter two reads between image and text in *Vanity Fair* to show how the novel's illustrations register what is circumvented by narration, centering whiteness and reinforcing an imperialist, bourgeois view of black, biracial, and laboring people.

Chapter three draws upon visual culture studies again to analyze how Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* and contemporaneous discourse on the uncanny verisimilitude of the stereoscope undermines the notion of fixed, immutable vision, calling attention to realism's disjunctive partial visions. In its construction of three-dimensionality, the stereoscope was heralded as the most realistic photographic technology *and* an unsettling experience of haptic visuality. The chapter examines how the pervasive staring trope in Dickens's novel fixes and flattens scenes to construct a similarly eerie, photographic quality that refuses the desired closure of realist totality. Passages of visual arrest modulate between interior, temporalized depth and static, imprisoning surface, locking readers in a paralyzing form that represents gaps and ambiguities in perceptual experience.

The project concludes by considering the virtues of visual imprecision in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Departing from her earlier observational realism, Eliot's last completed novel highlights realism's incapacity to represent gendered violence without resorting to sensationalist rhetoric through Gwendolen's story of visual subjection. Against Daniel's story, the novel's two-pronged plot forms a structural chiasmus that makes visible how conventional modes of realist representation deny women access to narrating their own repressive realities. After Gwendolen comes to embody second sight by prophesying her emotionally abusive husband's death, I argue that Gwendolen's narrative embraces indeterminacy. Challenging a masculinized, positivistic

certitude characterized in the novel as scientific knowledge, Eliot imagines more egalitarian modes of relation by releasing Gwendolen from a conventional marriage plot in the novel's enigmatic conclusion.

Realism, and nineteenth-century literature more generally, has often been read as ideological, repressive, sexless, and conservative. The interpretations of visual strangeness and narrative experimentation in the following chapters tell a different story. This work reconsiders realist strategies of representation to highlight their innovation in imagining alternative ways of being and knowing through vision's strangeness, its counter to preconceived wisdom and expectation. In the genre that most reflects the experiences of the everyday, novelists were also theorists and engineers of possibility.

Chapter One: *Pride and Prejudice* and Provisionality

It appears then that the real exists as at least three: a real corresponding to the masculine subject, a real corresponding to the feminine subject, and a real corresponding to their relation. These three reals thus each correspond to a world but these three worlds are in interaction. They never appear as proper in the sense of independent of each other. And when they claim to do this, they neglect one of the three reals, which distorts the whole.

—Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*

But self, though it would intrude, could not engross her.

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

*Pride and Prejudice* is, like all of Jane Austen's novels, about calibration. A standard reading of Austen's most beloved and regularly-adapted novel interprets Elizabeth and Darcy beginning from individually faulty perceptions, grounded in the novel's titular terms, and gradually scale back their stubbornness as they discover the inaccurate premises on which these perceptions are based. This mutual understanding forges the conditions for a properly companionate marriage, enabling the strong-willed lovers to live happily ever after. As a bonus, the marriage plot stabilizes what is thrown into confusion by the narrative's chaotic middle, and for nineteenth-century readers, radical alternatives to marital hegemony are cheerfully undermined. This reading posits that Elizabeth and Darcy are perfected for each other by the plot. The protagonists neatly align their individual wishes, desires, and perceptions to construct "a drama of recognition—re-cognition, that act by which the mind can look again at a thing and if necessary make revisions and amendments until it sees the thing as it really is" (Tanner 105).

To understand "the thing as it really is" suggests that there is an universal way to adjust to external circumstances, a truth existing outside of the singularities of perception. This interpretation tends to be unduly harsh to Elizabeth, in part because we enter her consciousness most frequently, and in part because critics gain critical mastery by partaking in "the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson" (Sedgwick 833). But this standard reading of the plot disavows

the novel's carefully plotted reversals that resist a neat, totalizing vision. As Susan Morgan shows, "[t]o understand *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of some ideal blend of the individual and the social is to speak of finalities about a writer who herself chooses to speak of the possible, the continuous, the incomplete" (80). Rather, Austen's novel refuses a teleology of perfectibility and explores perceptual judgments impossible to permanently stabilize because contexts, and subjectivities, are ever-shifting.

As Darcy and Elizabeth are gradually compelled by external circumstances to look inward and discover that their perceptions and reality are not always commensurate, that their first impressions (the novel's original title) are not sacrosanct, they develop a flexible and provisional orientation to the real that is not didactic and rigid, but intersubjective and relational. Austen narrates this shift through moments of intense visual experience, either lushly describing a landscape or inhabiting a character's interior-perceptual space, that slows narrative time and articulates the nuanced texture of character consciousness. With these visual experiences, Austen frustrates a unified, masterly vision of the real; thinking through provisionality rather than permanence offers a tentative and conditional orientation to external signs that holds open the perceptual present and, most importantly, undermines the authority of the male eye. The totalizing scan of Darcy's eye, and its subsequent judgmental closure, is shamed through Austenian irony to the point of dissolution. Austen reworks his visual knowledge to produce an intersubjective, erotic visual relation that avoids psychically colonizing the other. As the inheritor of patriarchal vision, Elizabeth, too, must engage in her own discovery of the presence, and fundamental otherness, of Darcy's consciousness. Thus, the intersubjective awareness of the presence and strangeness of another's consciousness, represented formally through free indirect style and irony, influences the development of the nineteenth-century realist novel.

### Mortifying the Master's Eye

In 1850, Charlotte Brontë famously penned a letter to W.S. Williams criticizing Austen's sterile, passionless prose:

what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of Death—this Miss Austen ignores; she no more, with her mind's eye, beholds the heart of her race than each man, with bodily vision, sees the heart in his heaving breast. (Brontë 782)

Passion is granted high stakes for Brontë as the “unseen seat of life,” invisible but persistently inflecting human interaction. Grounding her critique in the tension between visible and invisible, Brontë's dissatisfaction arises from Austen's inability to use fiction as a site for exploring that invisible force—eros—that bears a more intimate relation to experiential reality. Brontë's fiction materializes those invisible passions more viscerally, since she externalizes passion, sexuality, and primal anger with Gothic figures. Her commentary forgets, though, just how often the sexual erupts in Austen's novels: in the intensity of Mr. Elton's carriage proposal, wherein he is described as “actually making violent love to” Emma (*E* 117), or in Mr. Willoughby's seduction plot backstory, or, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Wickham's predatory sexual charm and Lydia's endangered sexual innocence.<sup>4</sup> These plots prove that Austen is acutely aware of the ways in which sexuality permeates and potentially destabilizes social order.

Brontë's critique highlights an area of Austen's purported failure where Austen actually excels: the representation of desiring interiority. Within the marriage plot, sexuality constitutes consciousness. Austen's characters can only *be* in relation to an object of their desire or

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<sup>4</sup> Citations from *Pride and Prejudice* are annotated *PP* where appropriate, and those from *Emma* are abbreviated *E*.

revulsion. Glimpses into character consciousness provide clues or justifications for outward behaviors, and vacillations in narrational authority require at least two modes of attachment to that interiority: sympathy (thinking with) and irony (thinking critically about).<sup>5</sup> This movement between narrating voices, free indirect style or discourse, initiates a radically tentative orientation to “the real” that creates perspectival multiplicity. As Lauren Berlant notes, it “performs the impossibility of locating an observational intelligence in one or any body, and therefore forces the reader to transact a different, more open relation of unfolding to what she is reading, judging, being, and thinking she understands” (26).

One of the political outcomes of free indirect style is its destabilization of a culturally-produced, hegemonic vision reproduced through patriarchy. Long before Laura Mulvey attached the “male gaze” to cinematic scopophilia, Darcy exhibits a strong desire to look allied with power, authority, and totality in *Pride and Prejudice* (Mulvey 11). Austen gradually diminishes the power of this gaze in the very first line: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (5). There is no shortage of critical interpretation of this famous first line, precisely because the narration equivocates its message immediately. The sentence grants decision-making authority to the “single man” with the “good fortune,” regarding “wife” as just another type of “possession.” But the incredible reversals contained within the line throw that reading into confusion, as it ironically undermines the notion of any ubiquitous “truth,” that any idea could be “universally” acceptable, and that a reality “acknowledged” is one really materialized. The sentence tells the reader to see the novel

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<sup>5</sup> See Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds* for the role of free indirect style in producing these two attachments. Cohn writes, “no matter how ‘impersonal’ the tone of the text that surrounds them, narrated monologues [free indirect style] themselves tend to commit the narrator to attitudes of sympathy or irony. Precisely because they case the language of a subjective mind into the grammar of objective narration, they amplify emotional notes, but also throw into ironic relief all false notes struck by a figural mind” (117).

as a marriage plot, a form of the status quo, but embeds within it an irony that mocks the desire for that plot. She only intensifies her ridicule for that desire by placing readers immediately in the Bennet family common room, sandwiched between a frenzied wife and her lackadaisical, unsupportive husband.

Rather than writing through singular perspectives, as in the epistolary form she experiments with briefly before discarding it, or constructing a didactic narrator imploring readers to totalize the narrative according to his view, Austen layers voices to entangle the partial, desiring views represented through novelistic language. The ambiguous opening line of the novel resting above frustrated dialogue, creating a caricature of marital discontent, represents just one perspectival tension in the novel. But another takes place through competing voices emerging from and acting upon a single character—the tension between Darcy’s narrated interiority and an ironic voice wresting control from him, revealing his unconscious vision. Through this tension, his mastering patriarchal gaze is ridiculed and thwarted.

Before plunging into Darcy’s interiority, the reader is introduced to him through a detached social eye: “Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mein . . . the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening” (*PP* 12). The object of the gaze is first Darcy, and it is a diffusive eye, an entire “room,” that admires him. As though this were a literal marriage market, the narration invites mass participation in surveying the goods up for possession. Readers join in Darcy’s objectification, determining his fitness for the town’s women before he is granted authority to perform the same function.

Once Darcy speaks, as limited as that may initially be, he exposes himself as too self-assured. His description and a subsequent revelation of his distasteful manners is narrated, still,

as though it were public opinion: “His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and every body hoped that he would never come there again” (13). Of course, “every body” defines an insular group, the folks of Longbourn and Meryton, two country towns with their own particular standards of taste and civility. The Bingleys and the Hursts, also in attendance, surely do not wish for the removal of their friend from the party and encourage him to perform more suitably within the context. The reader’s view contracts as it moves from a spectatorial “room” to an individual impression. A later passage reveals that we are very likely privy to the psychology of “the most violent against him” (13), the novel’s greatest distributor of gossipy opinion: Mrs. Bennet. The absolutism of her judgment is often the subject of mockery in *Pride and Prejudice*, and the narration’s hydraulics of dilation and contraction, objective views and subjective readings, ambiguates and shifts the perceptual position to destabilize its authority.

This narration also others Darcy to shore up the identity of the country town, circumscribing a community in which the reader becomes unknowingly involved before recognizing the perspective as delimited and belonging to Mrs. Bennet. Her gossipy tone nestles into a narration posturing as public opinion, forcing the reader to initially oppose this outsider. Darcy’s behavior validates this orientation, particularly in his first encounter with Elizabeth. As their eyes first meet after Mr. Bingley’s suggestion that he ask her to dance, Darcy declares, “Which do you mean?” and turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, ‘She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me* . . .’” (13, emphasis in original). The emphasis on “*me*” performs the work of self-dissociation, allowing Darcy to articulate and believe in the fiction of his separateness. Guarding

himself against the contaminating influence of this rural community, Darcy vocalizes through this verbal declaration his dominance and superiority.

Janet Todd also reads the initial encounter between soon-to-be lovers in this way, writing, “Darcy’s first movement towards Elizabeth is mastering—he rudely stares at her, then eavesdrops when he will: he has a perfect right to look, to overhear and to perplex” (151). Todd connects this performative sociality to a new romantic hero in eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century fiction that acclimates to the social only through the tutelage of a gregarious heroine. Darcy falsely believes, and explicitly asserts, that his desire and social life can remain separate entities. Unlike his coterie, he is incapable of adjustment and morally averse to performing the rituals of his context. “But disguise,” Todd points out, “is, as eighteenth-century social philosophers were never tired of declaring, necessary for civil society to function” (154). Darcy follows this particular hero’s journey as he gradually warms to a social performance required by his environment, and this maturation comes as a result of his affections for Elizabeth—a heroine who proves herself to be an adaptable, flexible, and performative social being through her sharp word play. Todd concludes with a theory of Darcy’s enduring attraction, submitting that he is a hero that “promise[s] a combination of the old social and civic progress with the new sexual charisma of the romantic hero” (157).<sup>6</sup>

However, it is not so much disguise that makes Darcy a suitable companion for Elizabeth, but an affirmed vulnerability to the complicated entanglements of self and other that the shifting perspective within passages of his interiority makes clear. These textual moments show Darcy

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<sup>6</sup> She writes more extensively on this new romantic hero, finding that Austen expresses some skepticism of his morality. Mysterious, handsome men abound in her fiction—Mr. Wickham, Frank Churchill, Mr. Elliot—but all are exposed as morally reprehensible, particularly in regards to their sexual behavior. For Austen, then, tempering sexuality with morality is part of virtue, and male characters exhibiting only one of these qualities are depicted as either dangerous or ludicrous.

actively worked upon by the object of his desire to reveal to himself a vulnerability that existed within him all along. And this process is distressing. He is drawn to and ashamed of his revelation, as the narrative depicts an embodied form of knowledge—his attraction to Elizabeth—struggling against his rigid, maintained narrative of self. His remark, then, that Elizabeth cannot tempt the “*me*” he has designed is a linguistic form of self-authorship that the narrative undermines along with the patriarchal privilege it implies. He remains in these opening chapters psychically averse to admitting his desire for any individual who might occupy this country town, yet Austen gives him only an instant of assumed superiority before his psychological surety begins to unravel.

It is only fair to mention that Darcy is not the only character who asserts his distance as an outsider by emphasizing personal pronouns in speech. In fact, nearly every character insists upon this linguistic differentiation early in the novel. Just after the first ball, as Jane and Elizabeth are privately recounting the event to one another, Jane expresses incredulity at Mr. Bingley’s request to dance a second time. Elizabeth condemns Jane’s modesty, responding, “Compliments always take *you* by surprise, and *me* never” (*PP* 16). She continues the slight against Jane’s naiveté, remarking, “You never see a fault in any body. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes . . . . With *your* good sense, to be so honestly blind to the follies and nonsense of others!” (16). Highlighting her separation from Jane in this instance reinforces Elizabeth’s own self-authorship. It is through difference that Elizabeth believes she gains her unique identity. At a later rehashing of the ball, Charlotte states to Elizabeth, “*My* overhearings were more to the purpose than *yours*,” and Jane later says of Darcy and his coterie, “With *them* he is remarkably agreeable” (20). Mr. Bennet uses emphasized pronouns to distinguish his thoughts from Mrs. Bennet’s, and Mrs. Bennet uses them to differentiate her positions from the

Lucas' views. Indeed, Austen's uncharacteristic overuse of this emphasis draws attention to how swiftly these presumptions to separation crumble.<sup>7</sup>

This blatant overuse of differentiating pronouns conveys a fantasy of self-consolidation, a spectacle of marking off, and a limit to the self believed to protect against the contaminations of another. Elizabeth, finally, reveals the fiction of this separation. In explaining to Charlotte why she cannot tolerate Darcy's pride even after Charlotte lists his accomplishments—"so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, everything in his favour"—Elizabeth counters, "[t]hat is very true . . . and I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*" (21). Elizabeth's statement reads as playfully dismissive, but in serious terms, she exposes the impossibility of fully protecting one's consciousness from the influences of an outsider. A feminine subjectivity crafted through patriarchal power distribution may occasionally resist external inscriptions, but ultimately remains vulnerable to them. Elizabeth's joke identifies the painful intrusion of an external authority undercutting one's self-authorship and identifies the extent to which she has already experienced this.

Shortly after Elizabeth's confession, Darcy's interiority is exposed. Austen recycles Elizabeth's language of mortification, a doubling effect that magnifies Darcy's distress and connects the two through this shared affect. Despite his vocal announcements of Elizabeth's inferiority, a glimpse into Darcy's consciousness as his eyes follow Elizabeth throughout the room exposes his anxious desire that is, for the moment, outwardly illegible. Austen reveals the dissolution of his pretensions to psychological mastery of her:

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<sup>7</sup> Alex Woloch determines that to be a character in an Austen novel is to be persistently contrasted with others: "In the story itself the sisters are, certainly, what Elizabeth needs to get away from in order to be her own singular self—but on the level of narrative discourse they are precisely what she needs to have around" (*The One* 47). Individuality in *Pride and Prejudice* arises out of multiple "juxtapositions" (53) that bring to light the construction of fictional character through a "tension of asymmetry" (46). A character becomes fully fleshed out and complicated through the distorted flattening of those around her, and this asymmetry of narrative attention organizes the realist novel as it juggles representations of singular consciousness and social panorama.

Occupied in observing Mr. Bingley's attentions to her sister, Elizabeth was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming an object of some interest in the eyes of his friend. Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes.

(24)

The narration here is unruly. It shifts abruptly from Elizabeth's attentions toward Mr. Bingley and Jane, to the narrator's indication of Elizabeth's distraction, to Darcy's individual perception, beginning with the judgment that he "had . . . scarcely allowed her to be pretty." Temporalities are muddled, as Elizabeth's actions and Darcy's consciousness are narrated in the conventional past tense of *récit*, while Elizabeth "was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming," a mix of temporalities that positions Elizabeth in the presently unfolding scene of "becoming" and simultaneously invokes a future-oriented narrative to be determined by Darcy. Elizabeth is entrapped within this narrative since she exists as an "object . . . in the eye." Darcy consciously believes that he "allowed" her and "criticize[d]" her, assuming an authoritative role over the visual scene. Nonetheless, his arrogance that he "made it clear"—his revulsion, his difference, and his mastery over his own affective life—is immediately countered by the narration's quick interjection, the word "But."

With that interjection, Austen's irony awakens as it prevents characters from knowing their perceptions completely, suggesting there is more to be understood. While Darcy believes himself to be immune from feeling, the reader witnesses the erotic tension in his visual

experience, even if Darcy is temporarily blinded to it. As he turns Elizabeth into a surveyable “object,” Elizabeth’s eyes counter this conventional dynamic. They dazzle Darcy and jumpstart his attraction to her, but they also return to Elizabeth her status as active observer and reader of human behavior. Despite her socially inferior wealth, status, connection, and gender, she has eyes that subtly but radically dislodge his authority. This moment commences the swift unraveling of Darcy’s mastery over Elizabeth *and* his firm sense of self.

That these initial visual exchanges take place at a ball enhances readings of their destabilizing influence. Meaghan Malone writes that these events were “highly subversive: as heroines and heroes synchronously navigate these heavily regimented spaces, they are provided with an outlet in which to challenge and subvert contemporary ideals of sexual repression and appropriate gender performance” (429). Reading conduct manuals and novels of the period, Malone reveals how “prolonged eye contact” was equated with intense sexuality and strictly forbidden (432). Darcy and Elizabeth, then, are immediately transgressors. Malone also highlights how the ball is a site of spectacle and reading, since observation of the dance made visible the “nuanced” significations of desire as they became embodied and performed.

However, Malone argues that Darcy “willingly submits” to Elizabeth within these spaces (443). While there does appear to be some capitulation on his part, which partially subverts ascribed gender roles, he does so without much eagerness. We remain in Darcy’s consciousness long enough to learn how unwilling his attraction to Elizabeth is. Continuing just after the above passage, Darcy struggles with the effects and affects Elizabeth’s eyes produce in him:

To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of

his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness. Of this she was perfectly unaware;—to her he was only the man who made himself agreeable no where, and who had not thought her handsome enough to dance with. (24)

Darcy experiences his invaded interiority as “mortifying,” a word with a series of painful connotations: “humbling, depressing; vexatious, annoying. . . humiliating, shameful, embarrassing” (“mortifying”). Indeed, Darcy’s pride falters as Elizabeth’s does earlier; his mortification is at once a “humbling” recognition of attraction, an “annoying” loss of agency, and a “humiliating” display of irrational weakness. These revelations “succeeded,” signifying both temporal sequencing and triumph, despite the apparent rationality of his “critical eye” (*PP* 24). Surveying her body yet again to find “more than one failure of perfect symmetry,” Darcy is compelled by an unidentifiable source to deny what he wishes he could judge with certainty. The narration shifts back to Elizabeth’s perspective only to relay the message that this heightened moment of interiority and affect (in a novel comprised largely of dialogue) as well as this moment’s usurpation of masculine authority were entirely unintentional. As Darcy quietly disassembles in his mortified state, Elizabeth thinks of him very little, and lingers still on their separateness: *his* shaming of *her* pride.

This oft-quoted passage erupts from the text as the first peek into the mysterious, aloof interiority of Darcy. Jeff Nunokawa highlights how this moment marks a narrative departure from the dialogue that bookends it, a moment of “withdrawal prompted by failures of epistemological nerve caught up, one way or another, as cause or consequence of love” (27). While Austen has set the marriage plot machinery in motion from their first meeting, this second acquaintance sears Darcy’s attraction to Elizabeth in the reader’s mind, especially because Darcy

psychically rebels against it. Nunokawa suggests Austen carves out moments of withdrawal from society for processes of self-definition. Suspensions of time and movement “arise when the bright air of epistemological grace breathed by the participants of Austen’s long conversation turns all of a sudden dark . . . brought on by the doubts of the mind sown by the powers of the heart” (29). These are passages of character freedom. Darcy, liberated from the demands of conversation, can remain stolidly silent as he works his way through his psychological distress. The result of these disorderly affects—that “[h]e began to wish to know more of her” (*PP* 24)—solidifies his attraction while undermining his power.

Darcy’s troubled interiority shares some similarity with scenes of “exquisite masochism,” as defined by Claire Jarvis. Assuming that most readers consider Victorian novels sexless, Jarvis argues for a particular kind of staging that suspends and luxuriates in the erotic, freezing intimacies within highly aestheticized space. Building tension through rejection and inundating the reader with sensory information, these moments fuse deferral and pleasure into an erotic tableau; “[c]haracters refuse erotic advances not in the interest of shutting them down but in the interest of prolonging and never escalating the experience of their approach” (4). Importantly, the scenes tend to reverse conventional power dynamics and aestheticize “female rule and male supplication” (13). While the passage revealing Darcy’s interiority does not quite qualify in Jarvis’s definition since it misses the indulgent aestheticism she identifies, there are notable similarities that her work helps validate as erotically charged: masochistic mortification, reversals in authority, stalled temporality. Austen offers readers a moment to exist with Darcy’s mind as he psychically grapples with a desire he consciously intends to refuse. The detailed examination of Elizabeth’s body coupled with intensely shameful affects places Darcy’s perceptions in the realm of a perverse eroticism that Jarvis argues is standard for the nineteenth-

century novel's strategies of sexual representation. To say it without saying it causes the reader to delve into a psychology disavowing its evident desire and experiencing prolonged pangs of despair, and that despair becomes part of novelistic eroticism.

Darcy's eyes follow Elizabeth from this point on in the novel, oscillating between desire's poles of attraction and revulsion. He repeatedly denies this desire, as he "really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger" (*PP* 51). Recognizing its existence while holding it at bay, he "began to feel the danger of paying Elizabeth too much attention" (57). Elizabeth attaches her own significance to Darcy's intrusive looks, contriving to "let him know that I see what he is about. He has a very satirical eye, and if I do not begin by being impertinent myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him" (25). Of course, Elizabeth does *not* see what he is about. She thinks that he has joined her conversation only to gather ammunition against her later, and so she builds up her defenses. Both expose their fears of being undone by the other's eye.

If Austen "show[s] her particular suspicion of the pre-verbal immediacy of sexual attraction" through these misread looks, she does not deny them their influence (Tanner 124). Conditioned to be wary of male attention, Elizabeth's self-objectification confirms the power that Darcy believes his conscious gaze to wield even as it is unraveling:

She hardly knew how to suppose that she could be an object of admiration to so great a man . . . . She could only imagine however at last, that she drew his notice because there was a something about her more wrong and reprehensible, according to his ideas of right, than in any other person present. (50)

Darcy's "fixed" eyes (50) uncomfortably land on Elizabeth and force her to see herself as a surveyable object. She reads herself through a patriarchal gaze inherited by both characters, and

though the narration lets the reader in on the secret that she is an “object of admiration,” Elizabeth’s best estimate of Darcy’s unblinking and fierce eye at this point is, unsurprisingly, that it criticizes. However, it is unclear in the passage who determines that Darcy is “so great a man.” If Elizabeth thinks it, then there are at least two interpretations of it: she verifies that he has inherited social and economic greatness in the particular contexts he inhabits, or she mocks the presumed greatness he *should* have inherited given his privileges. If this language is not of Elizabeth’s consciousness, however, which is likely since she “hardly knew how” to think this way, then the narrator clues the reader in to Darcy’s great qualities before he has the opportunity to share them himself. Overall, while Elizabeth grants the gaze some level of perspectival power, even if she protests that his gaze “did not pain her” (50), the layering of narrative voices complicates any “fixed” reading of Darcy’s power over her.

The reader does know, though, that Darcy is hiding his anxiety. Despite his psychological distress, Darcy remains under the illusion that he is capable of subduing his desire using the eye of a rational critic. Caroline Bingley knows better. Austen delegates to her the gift of perceptual accuracy in reading Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s eyes, though the position does not come with many perks. She is nearly always described as leering at somebody, and her vision has two unsavory root causes: her ambition to entrap Darcy in marriage, and her envy triggered by his wandering eye. Her eye “saw, or suspected enough to be jealous” of Darcy’s attentions toward Elizabeth, and she notices the severe disturbance this desire causes him (51). In a move injurious to her own marital mission, Caroline contrives scenarios that heighten Darcy’s distress, often joking about Elizabeth’s illuminating eyes (which backfires on her, much to the reader’s pleasure) or drawing attention to Elizabeth’s familial embarrassments. When annoyed that Darcy finds the pretense of

reading more appealing than conversation with her, she orchestrates an experiment to further aggravate his sense of floundering control. She asks,

“Miss Eliza Bennet, let me persuade you to follow my example, and take a turn about the room.—I assure you it is very refreshing after sitting so long in one attitude.”

Elizabeth was surprised, but agreed to it immediately. Miss Bingley succeeded no less in the real object of her civility; Mr. Darcy looked up. He was as much awake to the novelty of attention in that quarter as Elizabeth herself could be, and unconsciously closed his book. (55)

Contrary to Elizabeth’s “imagin[ing]” her “reprehensible” object status, the effect of Caroline’s experiment produces a “real object”—Darcy’s look. Austen reuses much of the language that described Darcy’s distressed interiority and Elizabeth’s misreading of it: “succeeded” here signifies a triumph rather than a temporality, and the “object” refers to the verification of Caroline’s suspicions, not Elizabeth’s body. With this doubled language, we pivot back to Darcy’s vision as he “looked up.” Caroline’s experiment works. She proves to herself what may be unknown to the key players in the visual exchange, that Darcy desires Elizabeth. He “unconsciously” performs the action that his desire demands, as his eye operates more swiftly than his rationalizing mind.

#### Looking with Love

In 1996, Kaja Silverman began a decades-long project of re-evaluating the role and ethical possibilities of vision in psychoanalytic thought. From *The Threshold of the Visible World to World Spectators* to the two-part *The Miracle of Analogy: Or The History of Photography*, Silverman finds possibility for productive failure in the psychoanalytic approach to

sight, premised on fracture and loss. She grounds much of her theory in the Lacanian mirror stage, when an infant discovers the concept of the self, an “I,” and perceives her mirror image as gestalt. Gestalt gestures toward totality, a concept or image understood through meaningful patterns and holistic forms that are greater than the sum of their parts. The perceived wholeness of the infant’s mirror image creates a sense of ideality, contrasting the vulnerability of the infant’s actual lived experience. The gap produced by this visual ideal and one’s perpetual material needs produces lack, which Lacan argues is the driving force of desire that can never be fulfilled but in death.

Building from this somewhat cynical concept, Silverman considers the role that a conscious awareness of the futility of chasing an image of ideality might play in forging more ethical visual relations. A subject’s desire to locate the ideal image dictates how one looks upon another, seeking to identify and disidentify with particular representations. As Silverman suggests,

when the subject jubilantly experiences ‘wholeness’ and ‘unity’ in identifying with a given representation, that has more to do with the temporary integration of the visual imago with the sensational ego than with the frame around the real or metaphoric mirror. . . . such an integration is imaginable not only when it is sustained by the gaze, but when the visual imago is perceived as lovable, i.e., when it seems to radiate ideality. (*The Threshold* 20)

If a subject can recognize ideality as the misperception or fiction that it is, instead incorporating D.W. Winnicott’s notion of the “good-enough” (4-5) in the realm of subject-to-subject relations, psychological reality might be restructured so that a subject can extend love where there was once either visual colonization (as in the gaze) or abjection (a form of looking-away and recoil).

Part of Silverman's discussion relies upon differentiating the *look* from the *gaze*. Often used interchangeably, the *gaze* more accurately describes a kind of visual interpretation from the outside. It is encoded in our perception merely by our existing within the world, and carries with it ideological baggage. The *gaze*, for Silverman, is what reaches toward ideality and falls persistently short. Conversely, the *look* accounts for that which exists just outside of the *gaze*, the *punctum* which catches the eye but cannot be incorporated through ideality (*Camera* 27).

Applying the concept to film studies, Silverman argues that the *look* can be a site for ethical and political traction, where vision has perhaps not been colonized and where forms of "heteropathic identification" might occur (*The Threshold* 23).<sup>8</sup>

Though anachronistic, the transition from masterly *gaze* to ethical *look* is enacted in Darcy's narrative arc. Part of what makes Darcy appealing to readers and to Elizabeth, and what makes him available as a desirable marriage partner, is the narrative's unraveling of his masterly *gaze* into something more open, vulnerable, and egalitarian. He recognizes that the self is not a bounded certainty, but a permeable and intersubjective site. If Elizabeth's perceptual education receives the brunt of critical commentary, it must also be noted that Austen undermines Darcy's mastery in a distinctly visual register that rewrites the conditions and qualifications for romantic, companionate love. In doing so, Austen is able to integrate vision's erotic and titillating components into a more equitable ethics than the nineteenth-century marriage plot may suggest.

This is not, as Austen shows, an easy process. The transition from *gaze* to *look* is psychologically laborious and shocking for Darcy, and there are several elements of masculine

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<sup>8</sup> Heteropathic identification, introduced to Silverman's lexicon in her 1992 work *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* and originally found in Max Scheler's *The Nature of Sympathy*, involves a way of identifying with the other without incorporating or "swallow[ing]" their alterity to shore up and define the self (205). Later, Silverman uses the term to describe an "identifi[cation] at a distance with his or her proprioceptive self" (*Threshold* 23). The subject agrees to hold the ideality conferred by the "visual imago" separate, "at the expense of an imaginary bodily unity" (23). This orientation to the other de-emphasizes the visual in favor of the haptic.

protest existent in passages articulating his interiority. As the tension between what his vision "should" perceive and what it really does mounts, he unconvincingly determines, after admitting that "[s]he attracted him more than he liked," to refuse any external display of warmth towards her (*PP* 59). "He wisely resolved," the narration reveals in ironic form, "to be particularly careful that no sign of admiration should *now* escape him, nothing that could elevate her with the hope of influencing his felicity." The narration plays with the word "elevate," at once meaning Elizabeth's inflated ego if she were to catch Darcy's eye and her socioeconomic status if he were to pursue her. He resolves to "not even look at her" as the multiplicity of his look's meanings potentially undermines the masculine, controlling gaze he thinks he performs (59). He routinely fails; even as he "was beginning to determine not to fix his eyes on Elizabeth . . . they were suddenly arrested by the sight of the stranger" (71). The language of capture and distress exposes the fracturing of a male subjectivity granted its authority through the othering of women, the refusal to identify with Elizabeth. Her eyes challenge his inherited power, and he is made vulnerable by his own unwelcome desire.

The eroticism represented in glances between the lovers highlights the differences between the gaze, which seeks to entrap Elizabeth as an "object," and the look, which releases Darcy from this colonizing vision. Darcy moves from reviling Elizabeth and her family's impropriety, to desiring Elizabeth possessively and against his will, to finally understanding that looking need not be possessive. This trajectory takes him through the intersubjective return, a concept Luce Irigaray writes of in *The Way of Love*. Within a philosophy of love premised in exchange, she writes,

it is necessary without doubt to admit that there does not exist a world proper to all subjects: one truth alone, one beauty alone, one science alone. And that

diversity takes place not only between cultures but between subjects, and in a paradigmatic manner between man and woman. Objectivity is thus not one and, moreover, the sensible and feelings have their objectivity and are worthy of being thought. Besides, they must be thought so that one can communicate with the other recognized as other. In order for the relation in difference not to fall back into submission, subjection to one sole subject, to values univocally established, each must bring a meaning of one's own into the dialogue. (8)

Irigaray finds the language used to describe love and knowledge as inherently possessive and object-oriented, over-concerned with transcendence or teleology. Without seriously considering subject-to-subject relationality, understandings of the self and other become “confus[ed] . . . with some horizon defined by death . . . a past plenitude or an ideal future” (9). These tendencies result from a distinctly masculine desire for the “mastery of nature,” and she posits that we pay closer attention to dialogue, a “horizontal” relation:

Giving up its artificial and authoritarian unity, human identity finds itself compelled to a cultivation of the relation with the other that it had neglected. The one is displaced from the subject or form being to the relation between different Beings capable of assuming the specificity of their real, of their world, without appropriating the other. (10)

The process of this exchange she describes repeatedly as “unfolding” (24) and “interlacing” (48), not as reduction, fusion, or incorporation of the other. The present continuous verbiage enacts the concept itself, which refuses the closure of assumed comprehension. Languages, meanings, and spaces become entangled material realities as subjects exist in a state of “co-belonging” (70).

What she describes is often called intersubjectivity in psychoanalysis, a recognition of the

presence, separateness, and unassimilability of others' consciousnesses. In Irigaray's view, this intersubjectivity involves an encounter with difference, the intermingling of two or more thoughts and feelings, and most importantly, a return back to the self for negotiation with rather than incorporation of the other. Without returning back to the self, acknowledging the separateness of the other and re-examining the condition or feeling of one's own subjectivity, the fantasy of possession remains intact. As in Silverman's theory, full comprehension of the other's consciousness *cannot* occur, and the desire for it comes from the problematic fantasy of wholeness, ideality, and mastery. If a subject recognizes the futility of ideality and wholeness, however, a more ethical relation can occur.

Irigaray uses visual tropes to describe the subject's new being that emphasize both clarity and openness: "They look at the modalities of meeting with the other, giving information about the gestures to be made without passing into words. They open anew upon the unknown . . . . They discover again astonishment, contemplation, admiration, restored to the ingenuousness of the child. They see anew, not blinded by what they have to see in accordance with speech" (45). Sight is often informed by a faulty belief in a master language, but languages in "dialogue" create conditions wherein subjects are open to other forms of being (44). Openness makes "perception an act other than seizing, naming, reproducing" (163). The return to the self ensures that an exchange occurred that did not seek domination or power, but that listened to the language and experience of the other without claiming it as his or her own.

Darcy's intersubjective return does not occur by the first proposal *or* his explanatory letter that follows it. Instead, the proposal and letter mark the last hurrah for Darcy's assumed power. His infamous words to Elizabeth are blinded by self-interest, even if directed to her: "In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell

you how ardently I admire and love you” (*PP* 185). Darcy attempts to ease his psychological distress by projecting it outward onto the object—how he still perceives her—that instigates it. His attempt to do so helps assuage his own mortification, his failure to possess her maritally and psychologically. If Elizabeth’s eyes have arrested and captured him against his will, he finds the only suitable defense to be an entrapment of his own design. The scene of intended union, then, actually displays Darcy’s complete self-enclosure, the structure of the master’s desire.

His letter following the incident is yet another moment of blind self-authorship, providing useful context for the plot that also marks a turn in it, as it punctures Elizabeth’s confidence in her own interpretive processes. Darcy retains the language of compulsion: “You must, therefore, pardon the freedom with which I demand your attention; your feelings, I know, will bestow it unwillingly, but I demand it of your justice” (191). His confession of interference in Mr. Bingley’s marriage shows him unaware of the extent to which his own desires color his perception, and he continues the usage of emphasized pronouns that draw strict delineations between his thoughts and others’.

It is only during the second proposal that Darcy’s transformation becomes clearer, as he admits to the ways Elizabeth has influenced his thinking. He begs her to burn the letter, recognizing, “I believed myself perfectly calm and cool, but I am since convinced that it was written in a dreadful bitterness of spirit” (348). He lists the persons throughout his life that empowered his perspective by giving it too free a reign, submitting, “Elizabeth! What do I not owe you? You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled” (349). The intersubjective return has been accomplished, though mostly off-stage. Only the pain of losing his mastery through mortification and the revelation of mastery’s false promise brings Darcy to a psychological openness suitable for Elizabeth’s, and the reader’s,

love. The sentence construction, “By you, I,” demonstrates this return to self following his dialogue with Elizabeth; he comes to acknowledge he desired mastery over her, rather than allowing her to shape and influence him.

The look and the intersubjective return occurs for both Silverman and Irigaray in moments of being. They require no history or intention, past- and future-oriented respectively, and relish in the pleasures and potentialities of the embodied present. In a novel, this form of prolonged presence is spare; plot requires the persistent march of time and finitude to function.<sup>9</sup> Nineteenth-century novels locate methods for embedding dilated presence and tactility. Elisha Cohn links scenes of revelry, dream, and hallucination to affect in lyric poetry, arguing the Victorian novel’s commingling with lyricism temporarily releases the *Bildungsroman* from a teleology of self-making. Instead, the text stalls narrative progression in favor of attenuated consciousness that lasts for a brief moment before the narrative returns to its conventional temporal-spatial structure. Her reading rejects the implicit argument that “diminished awareness and volition” within Victorian novels of self-making necessarily depicts “failure and suffering,” contending instead that they potentially open up spaces that “privilege feeling over action, and find plenitude in sensation” (4). Attention to affect in Victorian novels puts Cohn in conversation with Frederic Jameson, who asserts that the tension between suspended moments of affective presence and the historicizing impulse of narrative constitute the generic category of realism. Neither one narrative mode nor the other he finds capable of supporting the reality effect, and to

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Brooks argues that plot requires an end to create meaning, to put the plentiful codes at play in the narrative in place. “We read the incidents of narration as ‘promises and annunciations’ of final coherence: the metaphor reached through the chain of metonymies” (“Freud’s Masterplot” 283). Mastery of the text—which the reader desires throughout—can only occur once all of the codes are made known and interconnected through repetition and patterning. The most interesting component of Brooks’s argument, however, is when he engages in his own reversal, concluding that repetition also signifies the impossibility of beginning and end, as well as the necessity of a return to an origin that does not exist. Time cannot be fully rewound, and “[w]e are thus always trying to work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing of course that we cannot. All we can do is subvert or, perhaps better pervert time: which is what narrative does” (299).

resolve the tension between these modes undoes realistic representation. These moments of intensified affect for both critics do something to the text that destabilizes the totalizing function typically attributed to a realist novel, either through their deviant temporalities, their rejection of full consciousness, or their insistence upon an event's "singularity" (Jameson, *The Antinomies* 143).<sup>10</sup>

Through these stalled moments of interior vulnerability and tension, Austen dismantles the power of Darcy's gaze and transforms it into the more radically dissembling and subversive look of love. The movement from objective observer to subjective perceiver makes Darcy a suitable companion later in the narrative. This transition must be undertaken by the novel's heroine as well, who has inherited within the patriarchal system a similar visual understanding of the other. While her path differs from Darcy's, Elizabeth's renewed vision entails a gradual process that incorporates visual elements not found in Darcy's masochistic psyche but highly important to early nineteenth-century philosophies of visual representation: the picturesque and the portrait.

### Seeing Pemberley

Even before her eye falls upon Pemberley, Elizabeth is an embodied, sprightly, and impassioned erotic figure. Her romp through the mud to reach an ill Jane, cloistered in Netherfield with only Caroline Bingley for female company, is transgressive and sexually appealing to Darcy. When she arrives to Netherfield in "dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise," the rift between those who judge her positively and negatively falls along gendered lines (*PP* 33). Caroline cannot stand the lack of propriety, and Mrs. Hurst

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<sup>10</sup> Jameson does not argue that this affective mode escapes the totalizing impulse of narrative overall, as the other critics suggest in their readings; the singularity and temporality of these prolonged instances of presence operate according to their own logic, he states, but they are still susceptible to the realist novel's ideological project more generally.

declares she looks “almost wild” (36). For the women of the room, the sullied aspect of Elizabeth’s body overshadows any values associated with her bravery and familial duty. Mr. Bingley, on the contrary, finds her sincere commitment to her sister noble and her appearance “remarkably well.” Darcy extends the complimenting of her physicality further, as he cannot help but display his “admiration of the brilliancy which exercise had given to her complexion” (33), particularly his contention that the exercise had “brightened” her eyes (36).

Elizabeth’s sprightly and transgressive activity calls attention to her physicality and weaves sexuality into her character. Jillian Heydt-Stevenson references this moment and connects it to a picturesque sensibility, writing: “The implications in Caroline and Louisa’s sketch of Elizabeth are clear. Her ‘naturalness’ makes her look sexual . . . Further, she is using her body in ways that women should not—walking, running, and jumping do not fit the stereotype of the proper lady” (*Verbal* 131). While Heydt-Stevenson identifies *this* as the moment in which “Darcy begins to fall dangerously in love with Elizabeth,” and I have identified this occurring earlier, her reasoning for this argument is that Elizabeth, at this particular moment, “is at the height of her picturesqueness . . . she reflects that ‘certain playful wildness of character and appearance of irregularity’ so irresistible—perhaps because it is so familiar—to the owner of a picturesque estate” (131).<sup>11</sup>

It is significant to the erotics of the novel that Pemberley is a picturesque space. Heydt-Stevenson, whose scholarship shows a persistent engagement with landscape, the picturesque,

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<sup>11</sup> Using this narrative fusion of body and landscape, Heydt-Stevenson argues that contrary to conventional readings of *Pride and Prejudice* insisting the moral of the novel is to rework the lovers’ prejudices by forcing them to stay mindful of their own subjective biases, the novel instead “dramatizes how the body materializes the ideologies it has absorbed” (*Austen’s Unbecoming* 71). She ties this specifically to the wounding of Elizabeth’s body through Darcy’s gaze, and shows how this gaze affects Elizabeth’s sense of self through the objectifying language cited above. While Elizabeth attempts to use some of Darcy’s own strategies of objectification and judgment against him, Heydt-Stevenson argues that her persistent anger in the novel ultimately weakens her resistance to him. However, Darcy’s own internal revolutions and the masochistic elements of his psyche I outline above are not discussed in her reading.

and Austen's erotic language, notes,

picturesque travel . . . presents an analogue to body–mind co-mingling with erotic connotations insofar as it invites viewers to enjoy the healthy diversion of touring, pursuing pleasure, and increasing their visual literacy as they visit the countryside seeking scenes of grandeur that “burs[t] unexpectedly upon the eye.”

(“Sexualities” 200)

Elizabeth's experience of Pemberley infuses her sprightly energy into aesthetic experience and visually differentiates Darcy from his unsexy connections. Pemberley's aesthetic counters that of Lady Catherine's estate and Mr. Collins's Parsonage, which he admires himself for its “minuteness which left beauty entirely behind” (*PP* 154). Pemberley incorporates wildness and variety to make it aesthetically appealing, but Mr. Collins “could number the fields in every direction, and could tell how many trees there were in the most distant clump” at Hunsford (just half a mile from Rosings). The precision and quantification of the estate registers as cold, unnatural, and in bad taste.

But Pemberley is a veritable feast for the eyes. The narrative builds up to its arrival with strange narrational intrusions indicating that “[i]t is not the object of this work to give a description of Derbyshire,” assuming readers are well aware of that landscape and bypassing a string of towns the Gardiners and Elizabeth visit (231). When Elizabeth first approaches Pemberley, the narration continues to prolong the suspense as she experiences “some perturbation” (235). As in the passages revealing Darcy's unsettled interiority, Elizabeth experiences affective discomfort, blushing as her nerves quiver nearing arrival. Finally, Austen ends Volume Two in this state of high libidinal investment, another pause heightening the suspense of witnessing Pemberley for the first time. With these uncomfortable affects

predominant, Austen at last delves into Elizabeth's consciousness to describe this magnificent space:

The park was very large, and contained great variety of ground. They entered it in one of its lowest points, and drove for some time through a beautiful wood stretching over a wide extent.

Elizabeth's mind was too full for conversation, but she saw and admired every remarkable spot and point of view. They gradually ascended for half-a-mile, and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abruptness wound. It was a large, handsome stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. They were all of them warm in their admiration; and at that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something! (235)

Elizabeth's distress is quickly cast aside as she admires the visual pleasures Pemberley offers. The comparatively lengthy passage that describes the estate emphasizes the rarity of its aesthetic excellence. Like Darcy's visual arrest in Elizabeth's presence, Pemberley insists upon its "remarkable" grandeur, as "the eye was instantly caught," ensnared, captured. Though the longer paragraph begins with "Elizabeth's mind," we transition to "the eye" so as to make diffuse the

experience of viewing Pemberley—it is through Elizabeth’s vision that we understand Pemberley’s excellence, but “the eye” of the sentence seems to operate on its own, apart from Elizabeth’s conscious thought.

The landscape informs this visual experience, as the house looms above all that is before it, on “rising ground,” and is enhanced by its background, “a ridge of high woody hills.” Significantly, the estate’s visual achievements are grounded in its “natural beauty” which “had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste” that one finds at Rosings and Hunsford. The visual pleasure comes from its rugged and wild elements that appear organically integrated with the house, balanced enough to highlight the estate in its exceptionality. Austen emphasizes the interplay of the natural and architectural within this picturesque scene. Its charms are a matter of balance and calibration, not homogenization or “minuteness.”

This prolonged description of Pemberley is unique to the novel because, as Andrew Elfenbein has shown, *Pride and Prejudice* is oddly tight-lipped about detail. Description is quite sparse and the narrative is comprised mostly of dialogue. Elfenbein identifies the oddness of Austen’s minimalist prose that differentiates her realism from those that precede her (as well as the fat, descriptively-dense nineteenth-century novels that follow her). This moment of thickened description within Elizabeth’s perception demands that the reader pay close attention to the processes of her interiority while viewing something external, just as Darcy’s removal from social life allows for a moment of interior clarification. Elizabeth’s perception of Pemberley is her moment of “withdrawal” from sociality, as conversation with the Gardiners wanes to offer Elizabeth interior seclusion (Nunokawa 27).

The experience of Elizabeth’s interiority layered onto a more generalized and detached “eye” interpreting the space temporarily consolidates the two visions, creating a singular

pleasure of the picturesque. Though Elizabeth jokes about the form earlier, refusing to join an unwelcoming group because she would “ruin the picturesque” (*PP* 52), this scene of amazement reorients Elizabeth’s vision. If Austen’s brother, Henry, tells us the truth, we know that Austen herself was “enamoured of Gilpin on the Picturesque” (Knox-Shaw 74). He refers to William Gilpin, the leading critic of picturesque aesthetics who added its beauty to neoclassical and sublime aesthetic categories in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. The picturesque describes a calculated ruggedness, a proper balance of the unruly forms of the natural world and the cultivation and refinement of civilization. As Gilpin develops his theory, the picturesque and perceptual realism begin to overlap. Rather than refined smoothness of form, the picturesque deals in natural roughness and variety, interplays of light and shade, precision and wildness (Gilpin 20):

. . . we must at the same time recollect, that, in fact, the smoothness of the lake is more in *reality*, than in *appearance*. Were it spread upon the canvas in one simple hue, it would certainly be a dull, fatiguing object. But to the eye it appears broken by shades of various kinds or by reflections from all the rough objects in it's [*sic*] neighbourhood. (22)

In this example, Gilpin responds to a self-imposed question parroting one who may be averse to this aesthetic. He asks himself, “[a]s picturesque beauty therefore so greatly depends on *rough* objects, are we to exclude every idea of *smoothness* from mixing with it?” (22). His answer is that the lake “in *reality*” may be a uniform piece, but it is not experienced to the human eye as such. His example calls into question the usefulness of “reality” as a metric for examining works of art, posing instead another version of realism that is perceptual and impressionistic. This aesthetic of the picturesque frames the question of beauty not in terms of external Nature, or a

preconceived notion of aesthetic excellence. Instead, it asks, how would an eye really see this lake? How does *my* eye see this lake? This new framework authorizes some formal malleability in its approach to the common, everyday elements of aesthetic pleasure.

Gilpin's aim in his essay is not only to elevate the beauties of the picturesque. He actively trains the eye to reproduce a particular version of this rough aesthetic. While based in one's perspective, over time Gilpin insists that these studies create a "correct knowledge of objects" (52). The notion that repeated singularities of perspective undergo a sedimentation effect that leads to a knowledge of the object's reality pairs well with the empirical bent of the early novel, which derives its epistemological confidence through sensory input. Likewise, the picturesque's emphasis on surfaces, Nancy Armstrong notes, puts it in relation to early versions of photorealism, particularly regarding its reproducibility. In training the eye so that the individual becomes a producer of a particular kind of landscape, rather than a passive spectator, the picturesque increasingly commodifies the landscape by making it endlessly reproducible and subjecting copies to universal criteria (*Fiction*).

While Austen's descriptive passage of picturesque delights creates a lush, aesthetic experience for the reader and Elizabeth alike, William Galperin shows that Austen problematizes the totalizing vision associated with the picturesque, headed by Gilpin. He reads Gilpin's writings as insistent upon "a totality—with picturesque nature becoming more or less a synecdoche—in which a larger wholeness or more comprehensive version of the 'real' is routinely visible" (20). Extending the picturesque to fiction, Galperin notes that depictions of human life gained a sense of realism "*by virtue* of their partiality," since the picturesque transformed particular landscape designs into apparently natural spaces (20). In other words, the individual artist's perception of the roughness of the lake eventually becomes incorporated into a

larger, generalized notion of what the lake really is like, and a writer's concentration on individual consciousness eventually produces a representation of realistic human consciousness more generally. Impression becomes synecdoche for wholeness, in this view, while neoclassical aesthetics smooth and edify the ruggedness of nature. Gilpin's picturesque equates natural beauty with the probable, fraught with ideological implications of who makes the decision of what the probable is, in order to enact "a containment or suppression of the extraordinary and the improbable" (Galperin 21). While Galperin reveals how Austen's novels both contribute to and resist the ideological work of the picturesque, his analysis cites only the gypsies of *Emma* as figures that exist within picturesque spaces to reinscribe, normalize, and subdue their otherworldliness.

The use of the picturesque in *Pride and Prejudice*, then, is fraught with ideological and aesthetic ambivalence. Its claims to perceptual realism while simultaneously regulating a particular kind of vision suggest that realism is a regulatory genre.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, some critics value the picturesque for its emphasis on embodied knowledge and play that infuses a light eroticism into the narrative, or for its "redeeming more of the natural and everyday world for aesthetic recognition" (Knox-Shaw 76). What are Austen's uses of it here? Why might she use the visual pleasures of the picturesque to stage the novel's pivot toward marriage?

The answer may be found in Peter de Bolla's detailed analysis of eighteenth-century visual culture and its relations to subject formation. Visuality (the culture of looking) in the period produced a tension between "two regimes—of the picture and of the eye" (9). The former involves regulatory visual practices and situated knowledges pertaining to "high-cultural artifacts" that reproduce bourgeois ideology. The regime of the eye, on the contrary, involves a

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<sup>12</sup> See D.A. Miller, *The Novel and The Police* for a discussion of the realist novel's regulatory strategies.

more diffusive “phenomenology of seeing.” The two regimes are often dependent on one another, as one cannot see something according to the regime of the picture without seeing it through an embodied eye. When they diverge, however, there are interesting ideological and paradigmatic shifts that accompany that differentiation. One of these divergences is found within Gilpin’s discourse of the picturesque, which de Bolla considers less rigidly reproductive than Armstrong and Galperin do. The picturesque operates according to “the more populist regime of the eye” (121). *Anyone* can access the picturesque; it does not require particular tools, appropriate vantage points, or training by masters. Indeed, as Elizabeth surveys the grounds from inside of Pemberley, she finds:

Every disposition of the ground was good; and she looked on the whole scene, the river, the trees scattered on its banks, and the winding of the valley, as far as she could trace it, with delight. As they passed into other rooms, these objects were taking different positions; but from every window there were beauties to be seen.  
(*PP* 236)

The pleasures of the picturesque for Austen occur through a diversity of views that shift as Elizabeth moves throughout Pemberley. The interactive experience with a landscape matters more than a stable representation of the picturesque as synecdoche. De Bolla argues against those that frame the picturesque in rigid, homogenizing terms, writing, “Gilpin was after something more strange, more disturbing: an imaginative relation to the phenomenology of viewing, exactly a fantasized encounter with the real” (120). While the windows provide frames for each of these images, Elizabeth’s movement adds an embodied element to the experience of looking, allowing the “regime of the eye” to ascend over that of the picture and placing embodiment in a stronger relationship to visual pleasure and understanding.

The regime of the eye encompasses looks that escape regulatory practices and operates instead according to the eye's desires. Elizabeth's approach to Pemberley revels in aesthetic richness and detail available to all who look—it is "*the eye*" (emphasis added) that is "caught," not Elizabeth's specifically, making its visual pleasures open for all to imaginatively experience. Layering the reader's visual pleasure on Elizabeth's and magnifying the lushness of the prose, Austen then connects this heightened libidinal vision to the master of the house. She summons us to look at Darcy through this rich aestheticism when the visual pleasures of Pemberley are extended to his large portrait.

Standing beside the portrait, Mrs. Reynolds applauds her master's kindness and generosity, a gesture we presume extends past her wish for job security. As she acclimates to the balanced beauty of the space, she is briefly interrupted by the power of Darcy's portrait. Just as Darcy is "arrested" by Elizabeth's eye, Elizabeth is "arrested"—and similar language is used to link these two experiences—by her view of his likeness:

At last it arrested her—and she beheld a striking resemblance of Mr. Darcy, with such a smile over the face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen, when he looked at her. She stood several minutes before the picture in earnest contemplation, and returned to it again before they quitted the gallery . . . There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation toward the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance . . . Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character, and as she stood before the canvas, on which he was represented, and fixed his eyes upon herself, she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened

its impropriety of expression. (240)

The visual effect of Darcy's portrait differs from her engagement with the picturesque, even if the two are related by virtue of their narrative and spatial proximity. Rather than moving from frame to frame, Elizabeth is granted a pause for "contemplation" through the portrait's "arrest," a disruptive moment that challenges previously held impressions and assumptions about him. The dash punctuating this "arrest" stills the narrative further. Elizabeth studies this "resemblance" that illuminates aspects of Darcy's person she has overlooked consciously in her aversion to him, but that nevertheless found their way into her memory. Throughout the nineteenth-century, "[l]ikeness' is . . . a slippery, shifting concept, as the similitude it suggests is shown to be subjective and partial—the result of interpretation" (Bray 64). In this case, though Darcy has presumably posed for the painter, *only* Elizabeth can see Darcy's portrait in the way it is narrated because it reflects to her a particular look he inflicts upon her alone. The temporal pause of the scene is significant to its effect, since an interaction with Darcy would put Elizabeth on guard as she shores up her independent selfhood against his masterful tactics of possession. The image, statically pressed into the frame, silences Darcy and gives Elizabeth some degree of interpretative freedom.

Her viewing of the painting echoes the intersubjective return process Irigaray identifies, as she comes to the painting in "earnest contemplation" rather than a self-aggrandizing possession of his meaning. When Elizabeth "fixed his eyes upon herself," she desires no mastery in her reading of his look's meaning; instead, she willingly offers herself up as object by inhabiting Darcy's eye. Briefly inhabiting his perspective, even if through the fiction of representation, creates openness to its multiple significations when she returns to her own subjective position. She recognizes that her reading of his "fixed" glare in their previous

interactions was mistaken and revises her perceptions. The language as Elizabeth makes this transition gradually becomes more tactile and erotic, moving from a scene of visual “arrest” to one of “gentle sensation,” “warmth,” a scene and a mind “softened.” The one who transforms in this exchange of looks is not Darcy, statically pressed in a frame; it is Elizabeth, who reconsiders the multiplicity of meanings an eye can invoke and returns to her own preconceptions rather than assuming her complete knowledge of his eye’s meaning.

Just after, Darcy surprises Elizabeth at Pemberley. In a scene only too predictable by this point, “[t]heir eyes instantly met, and the cheeks of each were overspread with the deepest blush” (241). Highlighting the novel’s “erotics of mortification,” Mary Ann O’Farrell writes that the blush functions within *Pride and Prejudice* to make the body behave, if perversely, according to good manners (21). The blush makes legible characters’ recognition of their transgressions, intentional or not, since one only blushes if she is aware of how her own infelicity compares to accepted standards of behavior. While not consistently within the character’s control, it performs the work of revealing alternate versions of what is stated or performed outwardly, engaging in a hydraulics of concealment and the “pleasures of exposure” (24). For her,

love is a response to being known and, further, of being known in the way finally most credible—as that which one might not want to be known to be. The beloved’s pleasure in such knowledge is the same as the pleasure to be taken in embarrassment: the thrill of being known, the *frisson* of exposure. (23)

Though her reading vacillates between a Foucauldian “incitement to discourse” (Foucault, *The History* 17) and a Barthesian pleasure of the text, her framework for reading the blush also invokes Irigaray’s intersubjective hypothesis without completing it: their blushes communicate something interior to each that becomes an object of study in the interwoven space of their

encounter, indicating externally there is something to be known. But while the lovers have each independently discovered the errors of the master's eye, they are unsure of how to put that knowledge into practice when an actual embodied encounter occurs. Elizabeth completed a transformational process in entering Darcy's fictional consciousness, but she is not yet certain that Darcy has transformed similarly on his own, and Darcy's knowledge (or lack thereof) is comparable. Feeling only shame at her previous myopia, she "instinctively turned" and "scarcely dared to lift her eyes" rather than intermingling with his look (*PP* 241). The next several pages depict Elizabeth experimenting with and revising forms of visual engagement with Darcy. She first attempts to "turn her eyes on Mr. Darcy" (250); later, Elizabeth registers her eye's desire for an "involuntary glance" at Darcy which reveals him to possess a "heightened complexion" (257); and at the very same event, she notices by looking that Darcy's "eyes fixed . . . on her more, and more cheerfully" (258). These successive looks imitate the mutual visual exchanges of the former half of the novel but with a significant difference. Each has now recognized the limitations of his and her perceptions. Darcy admits so publicly to Caroline, sharing a desire that "gave no one any pain but herself" (259). Elizabeth vocally admits to her desire as well, and she ties it to the visual pleasures of Pemberley, if jokingly. She relates to Jane that her first notion of love for Darcy occurred "from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley" (353). This joke emphasizes the economic realities of marriage for women and her own impressive upward mobility upon their engagement, but Elizabeth's language has proven to be more layered than that. The combination of a picturesque estate that continues to offer Elizabeth visual pleasures as she moves within it and a portrait revealing to her new affective energies associated with its possessor demonstrate an important turn in Elizabeth's intellectual and erotic development.

#### The Realist Turn

Elizabeth is primed for her transformation before she engages in peripatetic travels through Derbyshire by Darcy's letter. This pivot in the narrative shows Elizabeth's intellectual, readerly movement from a totalizing worldview encompassing the values of her family and community to a fractured, partial image of reality susceptible to diverse interpretations. Reading and rereading Darcy's letter, she cognitively turns from one perspective to another, recognizing that particularity of perspective matters in discerning reality. It is not the letter itself, which is fraught with linguistic markers of self-enclosure, that primes her for this transformation, but her interpretive engagement with his language. While Pemberley affirms for Elizabeth her *attraction* to Darcy, Austen shows through her reading process that Elizabeth has the intellectual capacity for a cognitive, perspectival turn—a capacity she does not grant to all of her characters:

Her feelings as she read were scarcely to be defined. With amazement did she first understand that he believed any apology to be in his power; and stedfastly was she persuaded that he could have no explanation to give, which a just sense of shame would not conceal. With strong prejudice against every thing he might say, she began his account of what had happened at Netherfield. She read, with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes. (*PP* 199)

While Darcy's "account of the real" (199) is rather straightforward, the affects it elicits in Elizabeth are multiple and shift upon each rereading. The language appears to change its meaning under her eyes. Beginning her perusal with a position against Darcy, she can only respond with "amazement" that he would resume mastery following her rebuff. But the flood of potential orientations to the material overpowers its content, and she demonstrates difficulty

seeing what is there. Darcy offers an “account,” seemingly more rigid, narrational, and complete, while Elizabeth recognizes her interpretation as a “sense,” partial and dependent upon connotation. As she walks along repeatedly submitting herself to “mortifying perusal[s]” of Darcy’s language, she concludes, “every line proved more clearly that the affair, which she had believed it impossible that any contrivance could so represent, as to render Mr. Darcy’s conduct in it less than infamous, was *capable of a turn* which must make him entirely blameless throughout the whole” (199, emphasis added). The turning of interpretation embeds thematically within the narrative what Austen’s formal innovations are always doing: revealing the multiplicity of language and meaning, the instability of interpretation, the ways in which words on the page tell you one thing and can transform underneath your eyes upon re-reading. It is with her revelation of this “turn” that Elizabeth comes to recognize her own narrow perceptions that had falsely totalized what was more complex and contradictory. As she admits to being “blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd,” she feels a deep shame in this recognition (201). But partiality is only failure in the novel if it accompanies myopia. Admitting to her partiality and reframing her understanding through this partiality opens Elizabeth to other ways of seeing and knowing her world.

The success of Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s marriage plot insists upon this turn. In depicting a realistic world,

verisimilitude—with its necessary structure of difference—admits a flash of recognition that transforms and transfigures familiar experience into something seen and understood anew. Far from a strategy of containment, then, or one of naturalization, Austen’s real—the ‘real life’ to which her novel directs the reader—is . . . a reality to which one is somehow wrenched or ‘turned’ rather than

merely reconciled. (Galperin 24)

The turn is both conceptual and phenomenological. It places the reader in the perverse position of briefly inhabiting the space of difference and the unassimilable. Calling this detachment from a singular, homogenous perspective Austen's unique "Style," D.A. Miller posits that Austen's narration has the ability to distance itself from any one view: "its genius for detachment—for clean cuts—sever[s] us once and forever from all the particulars of who and what we are" (*Jane* 2). The freely-floating narration that occasionally attaches to, then releases itself from character consciousness marks a queer perspective for Miller, a "dematerializing" of "the voice" (6-7).<sup>13</sup> This narration belonging to no one in particular functions because free indirect style, according to Miller, expresses "the narration's way of *saying* [that] is constantly both mimicking, and distancing itself from, the character's way of *seeing*" (27). Miller's bizarre approach divests Austen's novels from a situated, mastering voice, and though he does not evaluate *Pride and Prejudice* as much as some of Austen's other works, he locates within this unique "Style" an effect that refuses closure and totalization. The undulations along a widening narrational spectrum through free indirect style make connection and singularity, identification and distance, sympathy and irony co-present within the text. The ambivalence of the visual within *Pride and Prejudice* calls upon this formal innovation and dissolves a totalizing masculine gaze into marginal, multiple, erotically-inflected looks.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the role of the visual within epistemology was central, as empirical thinking grounded in sensory input and "observation" supplanted a

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<sup>13</sup> In her excellent review of Austen criticism following D.W. Harding's "Regulated Hatred," Wendy Anne Lee rightly points out that D.A. Miller's work on Austen "reflects the queer's dream of non-situatedness" (Lee 999). Her essay provides a series of incisive reflections on the persistent relevance of Austen's fiction, particularly for its investigation of existence within a world "that we at once need, and need to object to" (1003). She posits a "self-regulating ambivalence" as coping mechanism for such a condition, noting that Austen's heroines provide models for individuals who "understood . . . the need to hate people while still retaining their love—a necessarily flexible approach to a compromised world" (1003).

Cartesian emphasis on deductive reasoning and “speculation” (Jay 84-5). As a form taking up the representation of everyday life, the realist novel remained conversant with empirical philosophy; “the English novel has historically been a product of the empirical spirit . . . [and] the cornerstone of empiricism is the acceptance of the primacy of perception as catalyst to ideas, or even as precondition of existence itself” (Hennelly 189). And yet, the eye is shown again and again to be a vulnerable organ. Harnessed and conditioned by ideological forces, susceptible to intensely subjective experiences, not completely governable, and at times mysterious, vision can disrupt one’s confidence in perceptual reality through its chaotic multiplicity. Vision then and now is ambivalent and highly relational, at once inculcating knowledge, producing judgment, and highlighting perceptual peculiarities.

Rejecting previous critics’ alignment of Austen’s philosophies—if they find her philosophical at all—with pure rationalism, Felicia Bonaparte suggests that *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates Austen’s skepticism of a reality outside of human perception, but submits that there is still a need in Austen’s world for a “hypothesis of reality” (143), or later, an “approximate reality” (144). In essence, she looks for a “good enough” reality that marks the provisional. Relying upon the assumption that Austen would have been familiar with the work of David Hume, Bonaparte states that Austen remains skeptical of empirical thinking, showing us repeatedly “an unbridgeable gap between perception and reality” that must be tested and retested against various temporal and subjective contexts and outcomes (148). She is interested in empirical evidence, but with the significant caveat that empirical data is always already “interpretation only” (156). The empirical bent of the realist novel exists formally through representations of being in time: sensory detail, affective immediacy, experiential temporal shifts, and specificity of reference. While Austen’s realism dialogues with the empirical

tradition, hers more pointedly advocates for a process-oriented and intersubjective sight that engages with the complex interrelations of self and other. Ruptures of intense visual experience within this descriptively-minimalist text carry the work of theorizing openness, presence, and provisionality that can be read anew through feminist psychoanalytic theories of love and ideality.

Realist fiction attends to the particular, the sensory, and the immediate, but for that particularizing to mean beyond its pages, it must explore “the ways in which particulars are conceived and known” (Lacour 609). Harry E. Shaw addresses this necessity in realism, arguing that while the genre registers individual being in an unfolding temporality, it also “create[s] imaginative experiences that elicit the mental operations necessary to confront the world they identify as real” (131). This mental plasticity “captures the form of the mental movements that will be needed to make sense of history . . . we begin to learn what would be required to take in present realities and to connect them with our pasts, and we taste the pleasure open to minds capable of such distinction” (Shaw 166). The collision of historical thinking and affective being found within realism conditions readers to carry that malleable cognition beyond its imagined worlds. This interplay is unique to fiction and more complicated in Austen’s work than some of her critics have registered. Distinction-making alone does not account for the layered forms of internal and external realities triggered by the intersubjective and at times, quite perverse, looking that occurs. If it did, we would need nothing more than Marvin Mudrick’s analysis of simple and complex characters that reductively flattens the complexity of the novel into binaristic terms and pigeonholes the text’s eroticism into simply knowing or not knowing about sex. What Austen shows us through these intersubjective looks, rather, is the layered realities on which the fiction of the self and its desires are predicated. It is this intersubjectivity that Rae

Greiner calls, after George Eliot, “fellow-feeling,” a cognitive, intellectual, and affective attachment to another’s realities that does not necessarily rely upon feeling another’s feelings. She reads nineteenth-century realism through its cultivation of intellectual sympathy, arguing that while emotion is messy and unpredictable, a “sympathetic consciousness” (10) within fiction is discernible and forms the bedrock of English realism:

The mere sight of violent feelings, happy or sad, is inimical to sympathy as Smith understands it; time and again, he calls on the abstracting powers of figuration to mitigate the deleterious effects brought on by strong visual and emotional display. Even impartial spectatorship, the most often pointed-to evidence in the argument for spectatorial sympathy, might be properly said to involve speculation rather than vision. Thinking, not simply seeing, enables the imagined exchange of places and circumstance facilitated by impartial spectatorship. (9)

She examines this theory in relation to the nostalgia of *Persuasion*, an elegiac meditation on lives unlived. Her emphasis here on the nonvisual component of sympathy would seem to contradict the framework for love as it exists in *Pride and Prejudice* outlined here. Yet, her contention that the development of a “sympathetic consciousness” occurs not through moments of visual exchange, but through a cognitive reworking of the other’s positionality that could be undermined by an experience of excessive emotionality, echoes the call Irigaray makes to interlace existences without colonizing the other with one’s own desire or feeling. The cognitive capacity to turn from a delimited view and examine another is the kind of interpretative process Austen implores readers to engage in, both through a form that destabilizes narrational authority and through calibrations of the marriage plot itself.

The multiplicity of potential perspectives is part of what makes Austen’s narrative feel so

realistic. She offers a ready-made world, enclosed and self-sustained, but operating within that world are singular visions colliding and reacting upon one another in alarming, titillating, mortifying, and productive ways that support a “flexibly interchangeable” vision involving a complicated entanglement of “eyes eyeing eyes” (Hennelly 198, 195).<sup>14</sup> She shows, as Mary Poovey indicates, that “[j]udgment is always inflected—modulated—by personal desire . . . just as vision is always governed by perspective. ‘Principles’ are often merely prejudices, and prejudices simply project one’s own interests onto the shifting scene outside so as to defend and reinforce the self” (195). She continues,

Individualism is not simply morally suspect . . . it is also based on a naive overestimation of personal autonomy and power . . . . for an individual living in society, every action is automatically linked to the actions of others. And to believe that one can exercise free will, even when parents do not intercede, is to mistake the complex nature of desire and the way in which social situation affects psychology and self-knowledge. (199)

Importantly, Austen’s fiction deals in the interpretation, modulation, and transformation of the self as it collides with and learns from what is external to it. Claudia Johnson likens this effect of Austenian irony to a “Möbius strip,” wherein Austen “first set[s] up two clear and discrete planes, and later show[s] them on the contrary to be coextensive” (31). Johnson emphasizes how Austen’s ironies first parody, then dismantle the stultifying and flattening effect of the fiction of

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<sup>14</sup> Hennelly also mentions that Austen’s free indirect style can be likened to a “stereoscopic vision” both ironic and sympathetic (187). He and I are both indebted to Dorrit Cohn and later analysts of free indirect style/narrated monologue, as I have cited above, but the technological term he calls upon here to metaphorize this vision bears relation to the development of realism overall. See my chapter, “Dickens’s Stereoscopic Realism,” for further elaboration on the device as it relates to formal innovation in the nineteenth-century English novel.

the eighteenth century, particularly sentimental fiction, to which she responds.<sup>15</sup> Achieving thickness in representation, particularly in a novel so minimally descriptive and sensorial, involves a process of cognitive turning that ironic narration invites through its multiply-voiced registers.

Realism's later iterations—the multiplot serial novel, the *Bildungsroman*, the industrial novel, and other novels of manners—adopt this formal oscillation between a presumed omniscience (if suspect) and a delimited perspective in detailing the interplay of self and society. Part of its function is to maintain intimacy with a reader, as it produces “a wonderful multiplication of ironies and reversals but also an intensification of what Henry James called the sense of felt life—a more intimate relationship between fictional discourse and the processes of human consciousness” (Lodge 177). The form of thinking and feeling enacted by slippages in narrational authority and temporality produce tentative attachments to the perspectives, positionalities, and affects represented as other. Novel-reading is unique in this way; it “seems to involve not solitude but an intimacy born of the precariousness of separation and identification, an exposure in which one feels, if most sheltered, also most vulnerable” (O’Farrell 25).

But Austen shows that we need not fear the partial, but see it for what it is—a reflection of the necessarily relational. In developing formal techniques that reveal intimate, singular psychological processes without sacrificing a detached critical perspective that can account for the multiplicity of perceptions simultaneously co-present, acting and reacting on one another, and bearing some element of contamination, Austen ushers in formal innovations and effects most useful for nineteenth-century literary realism. The vulnerability that comes to light through

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<sup>15</sup> Her juvenilia makes visible Austen’s early novelistic experimentations with received forms, and her persistent vacillations between parodic humor and shocking violence show Austen’s distrust of these forms for representing reality. Her relation to early novelistic patterns shuttles between affectionate mimicry and bitingly sardonic display.

the visual in *Pride and Prejudice* reveals the indispensable instability involved in giving oneself over to the provisionality of reality, the partiality of truth, and the pervasive, gnawing sense that “I was in the middle before I knew that I *had* begun” (359).

Chapter Two: Picturing Race in *Vanity Fair*

...regarding the drawings I know you are wrong, for they are tenth or twentieth rate performances having a meaning perhaps but a ludicrous badness of execution...

—W.M. Thackeray, in a letter to John Leycester Adolphus

Is the act of ‘witnessing’ a kind of looking no less entangled with the wielding of power and the extraction of enjoyment?

—Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*

In a 1971 essay, J.R. Harvey argues, rather surprisingly, *against* publishing William Makepeace Thackeray’s novels with their original illustrations. Though Thackeray was as avid an illustrator of novels as he was a writer of them, Harvey resists placing these visual artifacts in their original form for several reasons: some images he finds aesthetically deficient, some “grotesque” and unrealistic, some imprecise, some distracting (80). Referring to what he deems a particularly poor illustration of George Osborne and Rebecca Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, he writes,

It can happen in reading a novel that one feels a particular encounter is ‘seen’, that the author had a clear picture in his mind’s eye of what he describes. Here the situation is rather the reverse: we have not merely a description but an actual drawing, yet when we look at the drawing we may feel the writer has not ‘seen’ the incident at all, but is merely making a kind of hesitant visual guess. (80)

Harvey’s argument relies on the assumption that Thackeray’s illustrations exist solely to provide a realistic visual accompaniment to the novel’s language, necessitating a keen eye to register the details faithfully and fully. Making a “hesitant visual guess” misses referential accuracy, inadequate to the realist representational task at hand. Harvey’s argument pivots to allegorical illustrations opening the novel’s chapters, remarking on their capacity to “strengthe[n] the ironic narrative control” (86). Even when examining non-realist images, Harvey’s criticism values a close analogous correspondence between Thackeray’s language and his illustrations. Pictures

that unsettle or trouble the work of narrative rather than clarifying it are, in his estimation, superfluous.

The sheer frequency of non-mimetic sketches in *Vanity Fair* suggests that Harvey uses an unfair metric for assessing the value of illustrations in the novel. Rebecca Sharp as Napoleon or Thackeray's pint-size, child-like self-portrait already undermine aims at verisimilitude. Even seemingly mimetic sketches contain details that challenge or arrest the viewer's gaze in ways that differ from the novel's language. What if, rather than assuming their mimetic elucidation, Thackeray's illustrations were analyzed on the basis of their own formal and thematic engagements?

In *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, W.J.T. Mitchell suggests the emergence of the "pictorial turn" in theory and criticism, borrowing from Richard Rorty's "linguistic turn" in the 1960-70s (16). Difficult to define, yet omnipresent in the fields of art history, cultural studies, and even literary studies, Mitchell writes of this phenomenon:

Whatever the pictorial turn is . . . it should be clear that it is not a return to naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial 'presence': it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or "visual literacy" might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality. (16, emphasis in original)

Within the postmodern, commodified, and televised situation Mitchell writes, he argues that this way of interacting with media “presses inescapably now” on philosophy, criticism, and theories of culture. Visuality—the analysis of visual cultures, not merely art objects themselves—is central now to theories of subjectivity, power, and world-making. Today, entire academic departments and journals contain variations on the term “visual culture studies,” and keywords like “gaze” are used in scholarship and public writing alike (as in the first chapter of this dissertation).

Despite the datedness of its novelty, though, Mitchell’s insights have yet to be applied extensively to visual cultures that predate the twentieth century, particularly in illustrated nineteenth-century serialized novels. As recently as 2018, Victorian scholars have lamented the lack of attention to illustration’s distinct signifying capabilities. In *Victorian Literature and Culture*’s 2018 “Keywords” special issue, Linda M. Shires writes on the term “Image,” echoing the J.R. Harvey camp of criticism who “privilege the verbal” to the extent that reissues of novels are printed without the complete set of illustrations (733). Referencing *Vanity Fair*, Shires indicates, “[t]he field of Victorian images and texts—how they function in meaning-making and signal cultural changes that are intellectual, moral, and social—still remains underexplored” (734). Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surrige confirm that the general critical trend in studies of Victorian illustrations reads them “through the lenses of authorial intention or chronology of artistic creation, and hence as secondary or supplemental material created after the written text” (66-7).

This critical lack is a problem for a few reasons. First, Thackeray’s initial ambition was to be an illustrator, and he moved to writing after failed attempts to illustrate the fiction of others. Thackeray asked to illustrate Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers* and was turned down; “he

later claimed that if his application had been successful, he might have been an illustrator all his life” (Harvey 76-7). Several of Thackeray’s letters include doodles in the margins, pictorial signifiers of boredom, distraction, and whimsy that depart from the dry, logistical communications on his writerly progress.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, as Leighton and Surridge also note, readers engage with these illustrations unsteadily across time, potentially creating a diverse range of identifications. “By their very nature,” they write, “Victorian serial illustrations and chapter initials are proleptic, anticipating the events of the plot to follow,” and at other times, they are “analeptic, referring back to a scene in the written text” (67). In *The Victorian Serial*, Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund remind critics that nineteenth-century readers would have encountered serialized fiction alongside illustrations and advertisements, so that from the start “the novel or poem was not always a self-contained entity but a reading process embedded in a specific material framework that shaped response” (9). Finally, the literary market’s rapid industrialization meant that illustrators often would be commissioned to draw concurrently with the creation of the text, without having read its details. A simple correspondence between text and image could erroneously imagine a production process impossible for the illustrator, assuming his access to a narrative that had not yet been fully written (Fisher 85). In all, interpreting Victorian illustrations only as *supplemental* depictions of what is narrated limits their power as signifiers in their own right, and potentially falsifies a text’s historical and material production.

While much can be said about the sundry images found within Thackeray’s novels, this chapter explores a particular representational imbalance in *Vanity Fair* revealed through the misalignments of text and image. In Thackeray’s illustrations for his much-loved novel, he

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<sup>16</sup> See *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, edited by Edgar F. Harden. (Gordon Ray also edited a multivolume collection of Thackeray’s letters.)

makes visible circumvented racial dynamics operating within the social structures he lambasts. Meanwhile, the narration's playful indirection downplays the constitutive structure of racial hierarchy through an eighteenth-century aesthetics of irony and de-mastery, borrowed from writers of satire like Laurence Sterne, Jonathan Swift, and Henry Fielding. In other words, the images reveal what narration conceals, de-emphasizes, or negates through its comical formal destabilization. More pointedly, sketches of the novel's two black characters, Sambo and Miss Swartz, reproduce an imperial vision of threatening racial otherness despite the novel's occasional censure of the empire's hypocrisies. Though *Vanity Fair's* delimited narration is often interpreted as an ambiguous displacement of Thackeray's political aims, the deconstructive energies of the narration participate in a project of "colonial unknowing" that reaffirms the centrality of English imperial epistemology (Vimalassery 1042). Hidden in language, this textual aim surfaces in the novel's illustrations. Caricatures depict black characters' material presence and fleshy difference from the novel's major figures; in notable contrast, their attenuated existence in the text's language renders them mostly invisible, in the case of Sambo, or as a vehicle for the reassertion of white English "purity," as in the chapter mocking Miss Swartz. This visual representation upholds English racial typing and refracts the potential critique enacted through parody, caricature, and satire. By making explicit this representational tension, I conclude by addressing how the novel's disjunctive form creates the desire for realism's aspirational totality, a function of empire.

#### Warped Mirrors, Partial Realities

*Vanity Fair* is a chaotic read: Rebecca Sharp infuses the prose with a ferocious vitality; Amelia hyperbolically embodies conventions of feminized sentimentality; Dobbin, George, Rawdon, and Jos offer variegated depictions of Victorian masculinity, for better or worse. We

dive into the worlds of both aristocratic puffery and bohemian frivolity, maintaining a safe voyeuristic distance from the oft-precarious realities of the characters and mocking their pretensions. Despite this witty, lively movement along the rungs of social class, the narrator begins with a despairing tone, as the flaneur-reader is dutifully warned,

A man with a reflective turn of mind, walking through an exhibition of this sort, will not be oppressed, I take it, by his own or other people's hilarity. . . . but the general impression is one more melancholy than mirthful. When you come home, you sit down, in a sober, contemplative, not uncharitable frame of mind, and apply yourself to your books or your business. (Thackeray, *Vanity* xv)

In his correspondence to Robert Bell in 1848, Thackeray doubles down on his morose intention: “I want to leave every body dissatisfied and unhappy at the end of the story—we ought all to be with [our] own and all other stories. Good God dont I see (in that may-be cracked & warped looking glass in [which] I am always looking) my own weaknesses wickednesses lusts follies shortcomings [*sic*]?” (Thackeray, *The Letters* 228). Adding to these doleful statements is an image of the narrator on the title page of the novel, staring with a deep frown into a hand mirror, dolls and objects erupting from a toy chest behind him against the backdrop of a city skyline. He keeps his eyes fixed on his own image, itself “warped” and occluded. A vague outline possibly reflects the curvature of the figure's helmet, but the image is so obstructed and inaccessible to the eye that the viewer must rely on probability, and not empirical certainty, that the world sketched follows referentially. This image is introduced to the reader before the narrator suggests, “The world is a looking glass and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face—Frown at it and it will turn look sourly upon you” (Thackeray, *Vanity* 11). The statement is

more than self-help advice. Rather, the partial reflected vision in the mirror image parallels Thackeray's realism, which itself occludes and mystifies.

This is true of the copious mirrors and glasses illustrated in the novel. Heather Brink-Roby identifies mirrors as “phantom world[s]” that refuse the viewer full access to character interiority (126). She writes, “While we associate such glasses with realism’s aspiration to copy the concrete details of material reality (the visible world as it is), Thackeray uses them to inscribe the unseen workings of consciousness. . . . he uses [them] to insist on the represented mind’s unavailability.” The mirror also proves to be solipsistic; as Judith L. Fisher argues, the mirror motif “constantly reminds readers that they are reading one *version* of the story” which is clouded by self-involvement and desire (67). Though the narrator may be “trapped by [the] mirror,” forced to “tell a story that is a version of the way he sees the world” (68), other characters of the novel are shown reveling in their reflected image. George’s smiling admiration of his visage reinforces his selfish, navel-gazing attitude, but Fisher complicates this reading by pointing out that the letter embedded in this illustration is “I”—the narrator’s reference to himself (68). The ambiguous overlay of text and image announces the destabilizing function of the mirror, producing partial, obstructed characterization represented limitedly in the text.

The immediate use of the mirror as symbol underscores the primacy and failure of empirical knowledge within the realist novel. The opacity of mirrored reflections in *Vanity Fair* makes all characters—and even the reader, if the book functions as a mirror as well—susceptible to the subjective qualities of sight that erroneously fill in gaps to retain the sense of the self and the story as a coherent, legible entity. Because the sketched mirrors often warp or preclude full vision, Thackeray highlights the imprecision or partiality of the mirror to draw attention to the limits of self-understanding, understanding the other, and finally, the limits of mimetic realism in

articulating any singular reality. The fact that *Vanity Fair* is subtitled *Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society* on its original cover furthers the point—rather than presenting a totalizing, seamless realism, Thackeray presents abrupt and occasionally disconnected “sketches.” His version of realism is not that of one coherent mind, but an impressionistic and disjointed series of visions hanging haphazardly together.

The narrator’s relation to knowledge is also tenuous. He announces in one moment that “novelists have the privilege of knowing everything” (Thackeray, *Vanity* 24), yet undermines this confidence with revelations of his epistemological limit: “for how much do you and I know of each other, of our children, of our fathers, of our neighbors?” (40-1). These limitations are later emphasized by the narrator’s diegetic, corporeal appearance, giving material form to a convention typically considered immaterial and disembodied. His confession of ignorance works paradoxically, though. On the one hand, the narrator undermines the reader’s confidence in the novel’s depicted reality as referential, but on the other, the narrator’s willingness to admit limitation suggests that what *is* represented on the page bears some semblance to what is known—otherwise, the narrator lies, undermining the realist enterprise. Marking his own knowledge gaps, by contrast, suggests what is represented is what we can believe in, bolstering the novel’s realism in a strange reversal.

The narrator, major, and minor characters are all, then, severely delimited and partly inaccessible; their interiorities are inferred mostly through surface interactions.<sup>17</sup> In some ways, these representational absences relate to the problem of narrating history that Thackeray

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<sup>17</sup> In David Kurnick’s influential formulation, the Victorian novel’s experiments with narration bear traces of failed theatrical pursuits, which he traces especially through Thackeray’s failed drama, *The Wolves and the Lamb*, that is later adapted into his experimental novella *Lovel the Widower*. Thackeray’s fiction bespeaks “a frustrated theatrical desire” that can be seen in “the novel’s constitutive element of social longing” (36). In the case of *Vanity Fair*, “the much remarked theatricality . . . is a melancholy gauge of the reorganization of affective space at the Victorian mid-century to privilege the domestic hearth . . . Thackeray’s affection for ‘the play’ should be understood as a form of depressive dissent from this restricting of social and intimate space” (34).

investigates throughout his writing career. His fictions often look back on a temporal period (the reign of Queen Anne in *Henry Esmond*) or event in global history (the Napoleonic wars) to memorialize domestic histories that can *only* be imagined, as they have not been recorded. Absences within narrated histories haunt Thackeray's fiction, implying realism's attachment to historical plausibility and referentiality. Cristina Richieri Griffin argues that understanding history's fullness requires aestheticization after the event, citing the fictionalized space of Pumpnickel in *Vanity Fair* as a key example. In this section of the novel, the "narrator insists that history—whether personal or military, calmly quotidian or epically violent—must be experienced through the immersive detachment of encountering fiction" (416) because "personal pasts are only accessible through the same fictional forces as the more public and violent histories of war" (428). Though this realization is not entirely original to Thackeray, as Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* also grapples with this issue in its debate on the merits of reading novels versus histories, Griffin's reading implies, as many other critics' do, that at *Vanity Fair*'s most explicitly fictionalized moments, history feel closest to reality.

This is Thackeray's great magic trick: to insist so repeatedly on his novel's status as a limited fiction, only to be read as a great transcriber of history. George Levine concurs, noting that "[w]e achieve the fullest realism in Thackeray when we see how it entails precisely the violation of illusion for which James criticized Trollope" (133). Thackeray's novels traffic in a self-aware reflexivity that underhandedly gains the reader's trust and reveals realism to be an aesthetic decision or "sentiment" rather than a passive mimetic transcription:

I know that the tune which I am piping is a very mild one,—(although there are some terrific chapters coming presently)—and must beg the good-natured reader to remember that we are only discoursing at present about a stock-broker's family

in Russell Square, who are taking walks or luncheon or dinner, or talking and making love as people do in common life, and without a single passionate and wonderful incident to mark the progress of their loves. . . . Will he marry her?

That is the great subject now at hand. (Thackeray, *Vanity* 49)

The fictionality announced by the intrusive narrator's promise of forthcoming "terrific chapters," quotidian language like "mild," "only," "common," and a reference to the marriage plot mark the novel's indebtedness to, and parody of, the conventions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century realism. The narrator makes these dull details, attached as they are to "common life," appear necessary, following realism's particularities. That these details are not narrated according to other aesthetic forms is duly noted, as the narrator asserts, "We might have treated this subject in the genteel or in the romantic or in the facetious manner," popular forms Thackeray parodied in *Punch* (49).

Just after announcing the various forms the narrative could have taken, Thackeray engages the rhetoric of contrasts by pointing to the likely subjects of those other forms: wealthy aristocrats in fashionable circles, or conversely, "the entirely low" subjects occupying "Mr. Sedley's kitchen," writings that would remark on "how black Sambo was in love with the Cook (as indeed he was)" (49). Thackeray muddies the line separating fiction and reality, imagining what his novel would look like if it followed the aesthetic conventions of other literary forms. He inserts into his chapter snippets of Gothic sensationalism and sentimental prose accompanied with several illustrations. These passages and pictures serve as bizarre placeholders for the narrative that might have taken place instead of the one that really did (though, as it is fiction, it also did not). The narrator even admits to having seen, from "the outside," the worlds that these

narratives imagine, but contends that visual knowledge is not sufficient, as it does not guarantee that he might “understand the language or manners” of those groups (52).

Thackeray mimics aesthetics that are absorbed into the texture of the narrative he wishes to tell, despite insisting repeatedly that they are *not* the story as it happened. This comparative language suggests that the novel’s aesthetic best fits the everyday, commonplace events of the story; his subjects, caught between laboring and ruling classes, are rendered truthfully using a realist-historical fictional form and not through the potentially more exciting genres he mimics. The narrator comically admits his reason for spinning counternarratives is merely to lengthen the chapter: “this chapter about Vauxhall would have been so exceedingly short but for the above little disquisition, that it scarcely would have deserved to be called a chapter at all” (52).

Thackeray explicitly jokes about what lies beneath the surfaces of realist representation: a scrupulous consideration of form in order to discern which most compellingly and authentically creates a world bearing a family resemblance to our own. “And yet,” the narrator declares, “it is a chapter and a very important one too. Are not there little chapters in every body’s life that seem to be nothing and yet affect all the rest of the history?” (52).

Thackeray fictionalizes reality to make real his fictions; the line between the two becomes increasingly indiscernible in addresses to the reader like these. The transmutation of everyday life into reading material, and reading material into the stuff of everyday life, deconstructs the mimetic and empirical bases of literary realism and makes explicit the novel’s inventedness. In the nineteenth-century, reading *was* a part of living, as Garrett Stewart shows; “[t]he new scope of novelistic realism . . . naturally includes the everydayness of fictional consumption,” evolving from eighteenth-century forms that incorporated prevalent reading materials—letters becoming the epistolary form—into their fictional worlds (281). In the age of

the serialized publications, reading fiction was so commonplace that a reminder of a text's fictionality could have *deepened* its impression of reality. *Vanity Fair*'s tendency to call attention to its own fictionality in order to remark upon its realism involves, then, a line of reasoning that perversely solidifies its realist status.

Shortly after the Vauxhall medley of generic forms, a footnote plays another trick on the reader and widens the gap between textual and visual representation. The footnote indicates that “[i]t was the author’s intention, faithful to history, to depict all the characters of this tale in their proper costumes, as they wore them at the commencement of the century” (Thackeray, *Vanity* 63). The narrator recalls that the style of the Regency period was obnoxious, producing a sketch within the footnote depicting an absurdly large bonnet and hat on two figures. On a slightly apologetic note, he indicates, “I have not the heart to disfigure my heroes and heroines by costumes so hideous; and have, on the contrary, engaged a model of rank dressed according to the present fashion” (64). The footnote is attributed to Thackeray, the author, but dictated in the voice of the narrator, the man (who looks nothing like Thackeray) staring into the mirror on the title page. In addition, the conscious decision to retain artistic authority over the images by reimagining them according to contemporary fashions rather than the grossly exaggerated headwear of the Regency era separates the illustrations from the story. This bizarre footnote declares that the images interspersed throughout the text are fictionalized manipulations of a text already incessantly marked as fictional, energizing the deconstructive energies of Thackeray’s prose and further unsettling the novel’s already-shaky claims to verisimilitude.

Thackeray’s “warped,” occluded mirrors pair with a style that undercuts clarity through irony’s irresolvable tensions. His indirection forces the reader to rely on inference, filling in partial visions with their own mediated desires or best guesses. These gaps become mirrors, too,

reflecting back the reader's vain wishes for the plot to unravel in particular ways, or for certain characters to get their comeuppance. Thackeray's irony displaces moral authority in the novel enough that the self can become the predominant interpretive agent, as the reader internalizes the narrator's orientation to eighteenth-century moralistic didacticism with the vicious humor of parody and mimicry. This indirection challenges coherent and stable subjectivity when reading, fracturing and dismantling knowledge in dizzying slippages of voice, character, and form.

While the narrative creates a sense of consciousness as an impossible-to-know abyss, the novel's pictures jettison interiority and flatten character into visible, legible surface. Viewing an object necessarily involves spatial distance, creating a stronger sense that the represented object exists separately from the spectator. At its root, looking registers difference, and often antagonistically. As Rey Chow writes, following Fredric Jameson, "The activity of watching is linked by projection to physical nakedness . . . . The image, then, is an aggressive sight that reveals itself in the other; it is the site of the aggressed" (326). Though it can also represent "the site of possible change," an option theorized extensively by Kaja Silverman, Chow notes the difficulty in attempting "to combat the image, a politics that is conducted on surfaces, by a politics of depths, hidden truths, and inner voices."<sup>18</sup> Particularly in Thackeray's crude, monochromatic sketches, it becomes difficult to "see" beyond the visual type depicted.

The novel's illustrations are populated by both major and minor characters—Rebecca and Amelia are sketched, as are George, Jos, Dobbin, and even Thackeray himself. Surprisingly, laboring characters can be found as commonly, though they are underdeveloped as characters in the narrative. Their frequent visual presence reminds readers that narrative language has largely disavowed their presence. In fact, members of the laboring class orchestrate some of the novel's

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<sup>18</sup> Several of Silverman's theories on non-aggressive, ethical sight are found throughout this dissertation. See *The Threshold of the Visible World* and *World Spectators*.

most important events and appear, in scenes of their eavesdropping, at times more omniscient than the narrator himself. However, their invisibility in language flattens them into two-dimensional space, even as Thackeray offers visual clues that they are imagined in the writing with more complexity. Most importantly, the way Thackeray represents these characters quite evidently “disfigure[s]” them in ways he admits incapable of committing to his major characters (Thackeray, *Vanity* 64). That the novel was written during the height of English empire, when there was material and ideological investment in promoting a particular national consciousness and image as normative, makes this aesthetic choice suspect.

*Vanity Fair*'s “Queer Natives”

As Miss Crawley travels to Bloomsbury to reunite Rebecca and Amelia, she and her servants “gaz[e] upon honest Sambo, the black footman of Bloomsbury, as one of the queer natives of the place” (145). Miss Crawley’s unease locates the oxymoronic space that laboring figures occupy in the nineteenth-century novel: their presence makes others’ wealth visible and functional in the market, yet they are denied stories of their own, existing as objects that merely populate a scene. The brief encounter Sambo has with Miss Crawley partially mocks her snobbery—she “wait[s] in her carriage below, her people wondering at the locality in which they found themselves.” Her fears are assuaged by Amelia’s unthreatening femininity: “when Amelia came down with her kind smiling looks . . . the Park Lane shoulder-knot aristocracy wondered more and more that such a thing could come out of Bloomsbury.” The passage sandwiches Sambo between Miss Crawley’s impressions of Amelia, forcing a comparison of these two figures as they are both interpreted according to their “native” status in Bloomsbury. Like Sambo, Amelia disrupts Miss Crawley’s preconceived views of the place. Unlike Sambo, Amelia’s whiteness affords her a challenge to those early views. Thackeray reveals in this short

scene how snobbish first impressions can be altered, but only for characters already benefitting from their racial identities. Amelia's "sweet blushing face" and "complexion," in the logic presented by the passage, makes her worthy of a second look.

Structurally, of course, the novel requires distinctions between major and minor characters, and every character cannot be given equal representational space. In Alex Woloch's influential formulation of "distributed attention" (*The One* 14) in the novel, if "literary character is itself divided, always emerging at the juncture between structure and reference" (17), Woloch proposes that "the space of a particular character emerges only vis-à-vis the other characters who crowd him out or potentially evolve around him" (18). This theory of "character-space" maps onto class hierarchies in the realist novel as well; as a minor character flattens when compared to the robust space another occupies, that character appears object-like, a mere extension of labor product. Woloch writes, "[i]n terms of their essential formal position . . . *minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*; and the realist novel—with its intense class-consciousness and attention toward social inequality—makes much use of such formal processes" (27). This model certainly applies to *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray overstuffs the novel with characters so minor, and so confined to the products of their labor, that they become indistinguishable from the material objects surrounding them. In a chapter titled "How Captain Dobbin Bought a Piano," the preparation of an auction conflates laborers with objects:

How changed the house is, though! The front is patched over with bills, setting forth the particulars of the furniture in staring capitals. They have hung a shred of carpet out of an upstairs window—a half dozen porters are lounging on the dirty steps—the hall swarms with dingy guests of oriental countenance, who thrust printed cards into your hand, and offer to bid. Old women and amateurs have

invaded the upper apartments, pinching the bed curtains, poking into the feathers, shampooing the mattresses, and clapping the wardrobe drawers to and fro.

Enterprising young housekeepers are measuring the looking glasses and hangings to see if they will suit the new ménage. (Thackeray, *Vanity* 171)

The house, emptied of its personality following the death of its possessor, transforms into a site of consumerist accumulation. In all but the first sentence, a person is referenced either directly or by the effects of their labor, but are mostly crowded out by the description of objects. Who is “[t]hey” that have “hung a shred of carpet”? The “porters” and “amateurs” are faceless and occupy the same or less textual space than the “dirty steps” and “bed curtains.” The “dingy guests of oriental countenance” are only identifiable by their “printed cards.” The people noted are not characters, but materials amongst exchangeable materials, unavailable to a fuller, and more realistic, character consciousness. Printed next to this long description of the persons and objects of the auction house is an illustration avowing the scene’s overpopulation (Figure 1). While the text weighs more heavily the presence of consumer goods,



*An Elephant for Sale*

Figure 1: "An Elephant for Sale," from chapter 17 of *Vanity Fair*, London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848, pp. 144. Courtesy of Oxford University.

the illustration highlights the presence of people. Only the image of Jos on an elephant, which Rebecca purchases and uses to manipulate him into a marital and financial entanglement later, is shown as an item for sale. While this image does appear to be illustrating the scene described by the text, it invites a different way of imagining how the scene appears—not by descriptive objects that affirm a kind of commodity fetishism and clutter, but by the individuals vying for those goods (a different kind of clutter, perhaps). Through illustration, Thackeray refigures the space of representation so that humans, and not objects, are the focus.

The auction image and narration exemplifies in miniature the novel's representational strategies for describing Sambo, the single black laborer mentioned. In the first six chapters of the book, prior to the Sedleys' loss of wealth, he appears in five illustrations, three of which are in the very first chapter.<sup>19</sup> Set in the 1810s, *Vanity Fair's* events follow closely behind the end of English slave trade and strongly suggest Sambo's status as former slave. A generous reading of his status as a "queer native" might suggest that Sambo is "queer" because fewer black men were sent to England after the slave trade became illegal:

After 1807 the migration of slaves to Britain in the company of their owners/master was no longer legal. The resident British black population, primarily male, was no longer augmented by that trickle of migratory slaves/servants from the West Indies and North America . . . the local black population simply blended into British urban life, unnoticed and unremarked.  
(Gerzina 2)

Given the novel's repeated references to race, however, this historical reality would seem to overshadow the formative energies of racism determining several of the narrative's major events.

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<sup>19</sup> A quick survey of the first six chapters reveals that Sambo is surpassed only by Rebecca, Amelia, and Jos in illustrations. He is more frequently illustrated in these chapters than George and Dobbin.

Thackeray accentuates Sambo's blackness as his sole characteristic from the very beginning. Arriving with a "fat coachmen," the "black servant" is announced by Miss Jemima's declaration, "Sambo, the black servant, has just rung the bell" (Thackeray, *Vanity* 1). Introduced just before Miss Swartz, "the rich woolly-haired mulatto from St. Kitts" (4), his name likewise amplifies his blackness. In its earliest recorded reference, Sambo refers to an "African slave and servant" brought to England during the transatlantic slave trade. His death on English soil inspired a "sentimental elegy" written by Reverend James Watson, and afterward, the name came to signify a slave "dutiful to his master and convert[ed] to Christian belief" (Elder). In *Vanity Fair*, Sambo becomes a frequent reminder of the empire's reliance on the slave trade, still practiced in West Indian colonies at the time of Thackeray's writing and well into the 1860s (Gilmore).

The sentimental Sambo trope can also be linked to an established English hierarchy mapping various racial "types." In *The Imperial Magazine*, published from 1819-1834, an anonymously-written essay titled "Grades of Colour Among the Inhabitants of the West India Islands" taxonomizes race, citing "[a] *Sambo* [as] the offspring of a *Black* and a *Mulatto*—of course, he retrogrades one degree towards the *Negro*" (47). Following descriptors of several categories, the writer laments,

O Vanity! vanity!—what class of human society does thou not pervade?

Descendants of one common parent, (Noah) why scorn ye one another? What are most of the struggles for idle distinctions, which the proudest inhabitants of civilized Europe are so prone to make, but a contest between *Costies* and *Fusties* for a little temporary pre-eminance. Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity, and vexation of spirit. (48)

While it could be only speculative to assume Thackeray read this essay, planting a “mulatto” character like Miss Swartz in the same text as a stereotyped “Sambo” figure invokes this hierarchy and the threat of miscegenation. The writer critiques the “vanity” of those that depend too heavily on these categorizations using religious discourse, echoing the persistent lamentations of self-centeredness in social structures presented also in the novel. This archival material proves that a critical discourse about racial typing was available to Thackeray at the time of the novel’s publication. But while the writer of the essay upbraids the hierarchy by pointing to its reproduction of inequity that affords miniscule power to some at the expense of others, Thackeray’s fiction exploits this hierarchy for comedic effect. Sambo receives no character development, and a dialectic of racial hierarchy and the fear of miscegenation is never really engaged by his presence. Instead, descriptors of “his bandy legs” (Thackeray, *Vanity* 1) coupled with an illustration of cartoonishly splayed feet more strongly suggest that Thackeray chose caricature because he simply found this stereotype amusing.

Despite his racist portrayal, Sambo is incredibly important to the plot of *Vanity Fair*, beyond daily domestic and transportation upkeep. He often orchestrates how significant plot events unfold. In one such instance, he is illustrated alongside other servants of the house observing secretly as Jos and Rebecca become acquainted over music. He brings a tray of food and drink to the room that distracts Jos from his flirtation. The narration describes this interruption as a fated incident, destined to occur for the narrative to come into existence: “if George and Miss Sedley had remained according to the former’s proposal in the farther room, Joseph Sedley’s bachelorhood would have been at an end and this work would never have been written” (34). Rather, we learn that Rebecca leaves the piano and Jos “fixe[s]” his eyes on the

goods Sambo brings to the room, preventing further flirtation and prolonging the plot to the next fated event.

The next seemingly fated event is the rack punch episode. In a single chapter, Mr. Sedley remarks that Jos would be better off marrying Rebecca than a “black” woman with whom he would produce “mahogany grandchildren” (53). The threat of miscegenation provides the text’s justification for Jos’s and Rebecca’s eventual union. What gets in the way of this particular outcome again, though, is the bowl of rack punch Jos gluttonously guzzles, rendering him at first insufferably drunk, and then too ill the following day to meet with Rebecca. This delay provides George just enough time to intervene in the potential marriage. The rack punch appears to serve as an example of what Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth calls Thackeray’s “Providential Aesthetic,” in which “‘histories’ always belong to a timeless, apocalyptic pattern where origins and ends are not in human hands” (*The English* 7). Ermarth’s contention that Thackeray’s representation of history includes such fated events neglects what is staged by these two adjacent “fated” scenes: the invisible labor dematerialized in language and evidenced only by its products. When Jos calls upon the rack punch, he directs this imperative to a specific individual: “Waiter, Rack Punch” (Thackeray, *Vanity* 56). This speech act induces a laborer to enact the important event, but the materiality of that figure is negated as the causal origin of narrative is quickly identified: “That bowl of rack punch was the cause of all this history” (56). Contrary to a “Providential Aesthetic” of history, then, the disturbance in the plot which requires Rebecca’s more creative attempts at social mobility quite literally rested “in human hands” (Ermarth, *The English* 7), but these hands are made invisible textually. They exist only in Jos’s speech and the subsequent arrival of the object they carried, unrepresented as a visual component of narrated space and available only

through inference. Such instances suggest the prevalence of actors unnarrated by the scene, serving influential roles by virtue of their connection to the plot's major figures.

As Thackeray attenuates the textual presence of the laborers in the novel until they become mere producers and objects, visible only in their relationship to the resources they provide, the illustrations bear witness to this narrative imbalance. Domestic laborers are found in several illustrations, visually refiguring the novel's spatial structures. Sambo's frequent presence in illustration makes visible his presence early in the plot, and more importantly, creates visual linkages between Rebecca and the laboring class. In one case, the image of Rebecca throwing Dr. Johnson's dictionary out of the window features Sambo behind the carriage, his face held in a sneer remarkably similar to hers (Figure 2). Their eyebrows are both furrowed and their mouths are slightly upturned, modeling a cruel grimace. The others found in the illustration are depicted differently: Miss Jemima's face and upturned hands depict shock at Rebecca's spiteful defenestration, a young student at the school buries her face in her hands, and the coachmen, holding a raised whip, wears a completely neutral expression. Only Rebecca and Sambo share a delightedly cruel facial expression, uniting them visually in a narrative that draws no other substantive connections between them.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> One might suggest that another important connection between them is that Rebecca shows Sambo more respect than other characters do; early in the novel, while building her social connections, Rebecca "persisted in calling Sambo 'Sir,' and 'Mr. Sambo,' to the delight of that attendant" (Thackeray, *Vanity* 25).



*Rebecca's Farewell.*

Figure 2: "Rebecca's Farewell," from chapter 1 of *Vanity Fair*, London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848, pp. 6.  
 Courtesy of Oxford University.

Much has been made of Rebecca's performative dictionary-tossing in this scene. Most recently, Jami Bartlett reads passages containing thrown objects as Thackeray's attempts to theorize

reference in fiction. These “acts of throwing and being thrown are ways of tracing how one is in the world” (71), and her case study, *Barry Lyndon*, centers on many of the same metafictional questions found in *Vanity Fair*: namely, how reliably a narrator can tell of an objective or empirical reality. Her argument imagines that “throwing is not only a way of referring to reference in *language*, it is also the key to understanding how one experiences the act of reference as a being in the world” (80). Thrown objects, in contrast to objects that are grasped or held, signify the act of reference and its instability in fiction: “we throw things in order to take meaning away from them” (81). Less obliquely, Kate Flint interprets Rebecca’s act “as a jettisoning of authority, and a violent refusal of a categorized world in which meanings and identities are fixed” (“Women” 259).<sup>21</sup> And because she throws Samuel Johnson’s English dictionary, plenty can be suggested about what sorts of “fixed” assumptions Rebecca rejects: the

centrality of Englishness, as

her lineage is French, or its

patriarchal naming of the

world, or simply the fact

that it was given to her by

an English institution that

failed to domesticate her

according to its own assumptions

of proper femininity.



Figure 3: untitled plate, from chapter 6 of *Vanity Fair*, London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848, pp. 45. Courtesy of Oxford University.

<sup>21</sup> Flint’s broader argument is that referenced reading materials in *Vanity Fair* enhance the novel’s mimeticism, because the titles really do exist, while providing a gendered indictment of feminine reading practices that are too emotional. Female readers in the novel are rendered incapable of maintaining the detachment necessary for a critical assessment of a text’s morals, and Flint’s argument relies upon the masculinizing rhetoric of the narrator’s address to the readers. However, Robyn Warhol points out that even this address to a masculine reader is unstable, as the narrator regularly addresses a female reader as well. In this way, there is no consistent implied reader. See Robyn Warhol, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*.

Sambo's illustrated face—one of rebellious pleasure when compared to Rebecca's—is not the only instance that the laboring class in the novel is visually depicted with this expression. When the narrator imagines other genres for his story, illustrations of this possible other novel show a messenger smirking similarly (Figure 3); the coachmen following Rebecca to her new assignment as governess waits by the carriage with a sinister grin (Figure 4); and Miss Crawley's



butler hands her tea with the same facial expression (Figure 5). While these images are not the *only* representations of the laboring class illustrated in the novel, the repeated use of a sardonic smile in the laborers' expressions suggests that Thackeray imagines a particular subjectivity for them that mirrors Rebecca's. And because Rebecca begins as a laboring figure and a "queer native" herself, living in England but affiliated in a previous

*Rebecca makes acquaintance with A live Baronet*

Figure 4: "Rebecca makes acquaintance with a live Baronet," from chapter 7 of *Vanity Fair*, London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848, pp. 58. Courtesy of Oxford University.

life with bohemian French identity, the visual parallel established between she and Sambo implies that his expression, too, signifies the pleasures that arise from a rebellious mockery of the pretension exhibited by English institutions.

Thackeray's illustrations engage in the novel's critique of aristocratic and genteel snobbishness, the selfish desire for promotion, and the imperial, capitalist acquisition that grounds such interests to some extent. While viewing numerous episodes of vanity, deceit, greed, flattery, and gluttony, all of which exist to some degree in the context of social class or wealth acquired through empire, the reader

occupies the position exemplified through these illustrations: at the fringes of the scene, distanced from a knowledge of character interiority, unsentimental, and sneering at the characters shown before us. This spatial figuration permits the privileged position of occupying the roles of "both a consumer and a spectator," participating in the vicious pleasures of the sophisticate while critiquing them from the periphery (Litvack 65).

Glimpses of laboring figures like Sambo are obscured, seen only through partial visions as they relate to the primary figures, viewers like us of the social mayhem. Thackeray draws



*Miss Crawley's affectionate relatives*

Figure 5: "Miss Crawley's affectionate relatives," in chapter 11 of *Vanity Fair*, London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848, pp. 88. Courtesy of Oxford University.

attention to this imbalance, granting them some influence: “What our servants think of us!—Did we know what our intimates and dear relations thought of us, we should live in a world that we should be glad to quit, and in a frame of mind and a constant terror, that would be perfectly unbearable” (304). Like the squirrel’s heartbeat in *Middlemarch*, Thackeray suggests that the sheer number of domestic laborers found in the space of the realist novel would be overstimulating, too much information to process for the characters and readers alike. At the same time, referencing a collective interiority that would critique the appetites of the middling and the aristocrats—who the narrator has announced are the subjects of the piece—Thackeray suggests the laboring class observes with a monolithic eye, without the differentiation and particularity required of a fully-realized subjectivity.

Even as these illustrated scenes refigure the spatial dynamics of novelistic representation, sketching and therefore materializing the forgotten figures of the realist novel, the illustrations depict racist caricatures. The novel’s incessant critique of English vanities never fully addresses the problem of racial typing that justifies their assumed superiority. Rather, the racialized hierarchies exhibited in early nineteenth-century discourse are upheld by the text’s illustrations. Each character is risible, but because the novel distributes its critical attentions in such a way that moral authority is invoked only to be destabilized, the imperial dynamics of racial hierarchy and difference are largely sustained.

#### Imperial Seductions

Miss Swartz occupies a role similar to that of Sambo: racially overdetermined, caricatured in illustration and language, and crucial to the unfolding of the novel’s events. While Sambo’s illustrated presence makes visible what the language of the text obscures, representations of Miss Swartz in both image and text work to consolidate a sense of ludicrous,

intractable racial otherness perceived to potentially disrupt the social scenes in which she is a part. Her brief but meaningful inclusion in the narrative is important for understanding the more explicit forms of “race-thinking” Thackeray employs in the novel, particularly drawing on traditions of colonialist exhibition, minstrelsy, and miscegenation anxiety (Arendt 36).

Thackeray introduces Miss Swartz in the first chapter as the “impetuous and woolly-headed, but generous and affectionate” friend of Amelia’s at Miss Pinkerton’s school (Thackeray, *Vanity* 5). She is also an “heiress (who paid double)” for her place at the institution (5-6). From the beginning, Miss Swartz is an object of ridicule, lacking nuance and existing to highlight the arrogance, greed, and perceived superiority of English characters that cross her path. She is both “everything [George’s sisters] could wish—the frankest, kindest, most agreeable creature—wanting a little polish, but so good-natured” (204) because she willingly allows them to poke and prod her gowns for their own amusement, and, for potential marriage partners like George, “a perfect Belle Sauvage” (203), an allusion to the public exhibition of Saartjie Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus” George later compares her to (203, 214).

In a narrative filled with theatrical motifs, these allusions conjure the reprehensible history of minstrel shows and colonialist exhibitions, both of which marked the black body as exotically Other to the European imagination. Sold into slavery after the murder of her husband, Saartjie Baartman “was brought to Britain” in 1810 and “displayed almost naked in a cage. Her physical appearance, and in particular her large buttocks, was examined and prodded by the men and some women who came to view her” (Olusoga 406). These “freak shows,” along with the development of photography, the Great Exhibition, and the distribution of mass media, constitute the forms by which the white English came to desire closer encounters with black people, precipitating their continued transportation to England (407). The English demand for

“authentic” displays included Europeanized reproductions of “village life” that promised to make knowable the empire’s purported exotic locales (408). While these exhibitions flourished, there existed pocket populations of black Britons in England—largely in London—that have been “written out of our vision” in these histories (420).

Thackeray’s novel makes visible the presence within England of servile black and Orientalist persons. In the theater of *Vanity Fair*, they become a part of the “minstrel stage,” which, as Saidiya Hartman describes, involves representations of “the African as childish, primitive, contented, and endowed with great mimetic capacities” (23). Following Hartman’s interpretation of the complex dynamics of racialized spectacle in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, it is clear that the few chapters involving Miss Swartz “transfor[m] subjugation into a pleasing display for the master” by invoking “innocent amusements [which] constitut[e] a form of symbolic violence” (42). The same can be said of Sambo. Though Hartman’s analysis stems from archival materials on American slavery, several of her arguments apply to the representation of black characters in Thackeray’s novel: their “fungibility,” commodified interchangeability, and “hyperembodiness” are all reflected by the frequency of illustrated caricatures which contrasts their inexpressible, silenced, or indecipherable language (19). Miss Swartz differs from Hartman’s case studies, particularly because her wealth and Jewish ancestry grants her the cultural capital her blackness threatens. Yet, the novel’s digs at her garish excess do not suggest a mere logic of anti-consumerism or a critique of her wealth—they are repeatedly conflated with the color of her skin. George exclaims to Amelia,

You should have seen her dress for court . . . Her diamonds blazed out like

Vauxhall on the night we were there . . . Diamonds and mahogany, my dear!

think what an advantageous contrast—and the white feathers in her hair—I mean her wool. She had earrings like chandeliers; you might have lighted ‘em up, by Jove—and a yellow satin train that streeled after her like the tail of a cornet.

(Thackeray, *Vanity* 204)

George reveals that Miss Swartz’s gauche displays of wealth are only partly the target of ridicule. The “contrast” specifically delights and disgusts him: white diamonds against black skin, white feathers against black hair. As Hartman explains, minstrel shows played upon similar contrasting dynamics by inviting “the embodiment of unmentionable and transgressive pleasures . . . the fashioning of blackness aroused pity and fear, desire and revulsion, and terror and pleasure” (27).

Miss Swartz is the focus of only two chapters, suggesting a relatively minor role in the novel’s “character-space” (Woloch, *The One* 27). Yet, this episode reveals a fact of the *Vanity Fair* world: the only thing that can stem the greedy tides of accumulation proliferating throughout is the harrowing threat of miscegenation. Unlike his father, George cannot blind himself to Miss Swartz’s intractable Otherness, and the novel’s ridicule of Miss Swartz mostly comes down to her incapacity to “properly” assimilate to English whiteness. Her voice is often represented as unintelligible; her “hysterical *yoops*” are “as no pen can depict” (7), and though she declares she “can sing ‘Fluvy du Tadjy . . . if I had the words’,” her white English companions condescendingly correct her speech immediately: “O, ‘Fleuve du Tage’” (211). Just as her wealth cannot purchase English respectability, she also cannot purchase sexual desirability. While George’s “whiskers had begun to do their work, and to curl themselves round the affections of Miss Swartz,” her appearance does not produce the same effect on him (209). She is marked by her “very name,” a German homonym that translates to “black,” and doubly marginalized by her

parentage; as George speculates, “[h]er father was a German Jew—a slave-owner they say—connected with the Cannibal Islands in some way” (204). According to this bit of gossip, then, Miss Swartz’s inherited wealth was secured through a violent global system that would otherwise have traded and abused her for profit. Her known paternity insinuates that her mother was a black woman in the West Indies, possibly a slave on her father’s plantation, which strongly implies coercive sexual violence. These inferences convey a shameful history repressed or disavowed by the novel’s playful, sneering treatment, and the passage’s complicated revelations and concealments, like the partial visions of the mirror, encourage the reader’s symptomatic reading on these matters rather surface-level certainty.

Though Thackeray’s biographer Gordon Ray calls him a “quietist” on issues of race following his visit to America, John Sutherland counters, “in the front line of his following (and last) three novels Thackeray introduces gross racial caricatures” (Sutherland 443). Citing parodies in *Punch* as well as his last novels—*The Newcomes*, *The Virginians*, and *Philip*—Sutherland is among the few critics that firmly hold Thackeray accountable for his racist caricaturing. With the threat of miscegenation especially, Thackeray exhibits “an inconvertible overtone of uneasiness” when discussing his half-sister, who was part Indian, and his niece, whom he calls “black” in one letter (Davies 327, 328).<sup>22</sup> Following the description of Mrs. Bute Crawley’s “black-faced” countenance, and drawing attention to her “suggested Scottish heritage,” Ed Wiltse discusses how blackness was in some ways a catch-all descriptor for any character touched by colonialism, including the Irish (47). He writes, “it is not only racial or national otherness that can blacken England’s outsiders. A stint in the colonies often darkens a

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<sup>22</sup> Davies’s “The Miscegenation Theme in the Works of Thackeray” provides an excellent and brief list of instances across Thackeray’s fiction where the threat of miscegenation becomes crucial to the plot; however, he argues that the presence of Miss Swartz in the novel is merely to expose “society’s worship of wealth” (329), a surprisingly frequent reading that this chapter aims to complicate.

character, not only because of the yellow fever that has yellowed Dobbin, but especially because of the ever-present threat of ‘going native,’ or worse, marrying native.” That Thackeray continuously recycles these descriptors for anyone not of the white English upper- and middle-classes reveals an overdetermined racial hierarchy informing his characters. Even as Thackeray ironizes some of England’s prejudiced insights through George—as in the case of Mrs. O’Dowd, who, like Miss Swartz, highlights George’s “snobbery”—the fundamental structure of the hierarchy remains undissolved (49). As Wiltse shows, “Mrs. O’Dowd’s confusion all the more emphatically re-asserts the national cultural hierarchies that locate her culture on the bottom rung” (49).

Once he desires a marital alliance between George and Miss Swartz, even Mr. Osborne becomes linked to blackness figuratively (though not materially), described as “almost black in the face” with anger (Thackeray, *Vanity* 214). George’s refusal is understood as a rebellion, but in George’s view, it maintains the sanctity of English identity: “you would have me shown up as a coward, sir, and our name dishonoured for the sake of Miss Swartz’s money,” he counters (208). George cannot bear to imagine “being seen” in public “by the side of such a Mahogany Charmer.” Part of Mr. Osborne’s argument for marrying Miss Swartz is that George could secure the wealth and prestige needed to end his military career, and he believed him “a fool to risk his life abroad” when another option is so readily available (208). Viewed this way, Miss Swartz’s presence passively disrupts the Osborne family, which in turn harms the Sedley family (as Amelia loses her husband and is left caring for his child). Though occupying very little narrative space within the larger networked system of the novel, her perceived Otherness precipitates the temporary collapse of the English families’ cohesion that continues a plot of greed and self-centeredness.

Though George is despicable for his impolite jesting at Miss Swartz's expense, her champions, Mr. Osborne and his daughters, are also represented negatively as idolaters of her ostentatious wealth. This tension erupts in passages focalized through George's perspective, like when

he came home to find his sisters spread in starched muslin in the drawing-room, the dowagers cackling in the back-ground, and honest Swartz in her favourite amber-coloured satin, with turquoise-bracelets, countless rings, flowers, feathers, and all sorts of tags and gimcracks, about as elegantly decorated as a she chimney-sweep on May day. (209)

This description signifies not only that George is disgusted by his sisters' adoration of Miss Swartz's material things, but that George notices these imperial accoutrements himself. Despite her fineries, she can appear no better to him than "a she chimney-sweep," directly equating her dark skin with soot and grime. Her material wealth seems out of place, costume jewelry worn for a pagan festival rather than evidence of her family's imperial wealth. While "[a]nything so becoming as the satin the sisters had never seen," George's focus lies only the fact that Miss Swartz "looked like a China doll, which has nothing to do all day but to grin and wag its head" (209). His language dehumanizes Miss Swartz while the rest of his family similarly belittle her by emphasizing her value as an exotic commodity.



Figure 6: untitled plate, from chapter 21 of *Vanity Fair*, London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848, pp. 182. Courtesy of Oxford University.

Miss Swartz is rendered a plaything for the novel's characters, inciting their worst or most vapid inclinations. In the chapter concerning her most, "A Quarrel about an Heiress," Miss Swartz is figured as a doll in the opening letter illustration, a toy for a young white girl; in the second illustration of her, she is admired by George's fawning sisters, her eyes exhibiting a crazed look. But the final illustration of

Miss Swartz is the most memorable because while, like the others, it marks her as

unassimilable to Englishness, she returns the viewer's gaze in a rare instance of illustrated frontality (Figure 6). Swiveled on her piano bench, this illustration features Miss Swartz staring back through the page, matching the spectator's eye with a look of surprise and openness.

Contrary to Stephen Canham's assertion that "almost all of the illustrations simply show the characters from straight on" (49), this picture is one of only three depicting characters meeting the eye of the viewer. The only others are, notably, Rebecca and Thackeray himself, in a self-portrait that diminishes him to child-like form. Other illustrations depict characters in profile, with their faces turned slightly and their eyeline falling upon the scenes surrounding them or staring out of windows.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Dames examines the copious illustrations depicting "half-attentive states," like looking out of a window, into a mirror, or reading a book, which he argues invite the reader to take pleasure in a break from the narrator's control (*The Physiology* 83). The novel encourages "interruption" as a tool or form of absorption contrary to the demands of the narrative; illustrating "distractable" characters in their moments of reverie or inattention counters a

In these examples, the illustrated gaze is confined to the diegetic scene, consistent with the novel's representation of self-centered, narrow-minded, and insular vanity. These illustrations sustain the illusion of separateness for the reader, reaffirming the text's mimetic quality by keeping the narrative internal and holistic. But in this unique picture, Miss Swartz looks back, disrupting the narrative and drawing the viewer into the represented world. Her eyes create an arresting stalemate, meant to be humorous but presenting a striking challenge to the imperial eye that has otherwise marginalized and dissected her. Regardless of Thackeray's intent to mock Miss Swartz's appearance, the picture's effect is to return and challenge the reader's consuming gaze by confronting this mocking, unsympathetic view.

Despite this eruptive illustrated scene, the narrative suggests that Miss Swartz relishes the physical evidence of her wealth and eroticizes the possibility of her own subjection. In a brief passage focalized through her perspective, Thackeray writes that “[s]he went to great expenses in new gowns, and bracelets, and bonnets, and in prodigious feathers. She adorned her person with her utmost skill to please the Conqueror” (209). Calling George, whom she admires for his “swaggering and melancholy” (208), her “Conqueror” eroticizes the imperial dynamics that have been suggested by their potential marriage all along. Internalizing this master/slave dynamic of desire reproduces the conditions of her own being; she reaffirms her blackness, when blackness is taken to indicate “a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation” (Hartman 57). Thackeray's novel upholds this imperial definition of blackness through “the joining of race, subjection, and spectacle [that] is intended to denaturalize race and underline its givenness—that is, the strategies through which it is made to appear as if it already existed, thereby denying the coerced and cultivated production of race.” Miss Swartz

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model of Victorian cognition in character, potentially producing flatter characters but offering the reader a kind of “liberty” to also be inattentive and uninfluenced (88).

desires her own subjection under a militant and masculine imperial figure like George. But unlike the case studies of Hartman's archive, Miss Swartz is *not* an actual black person—she is a European novelist's fantasy and invention, a “performanc[e] of blackness” legible to the reader only through this “spectacle of mastery and the enactment of a willed subjection” (58).

When Miss Swartz has served her purpose—to infuse the novel with an erotic imperial dynamic that she supplies herself—this economy of desire is transported to the marriage George chooses with Amelia. Thackeray attaches the language of imperial subjection onto Amelia, as George's attraction to his wife stems from her imagined position as a “slave” to him (196).<sup>24</sup> Amelia finds pleasure in this arrangement of power, too; she thinks of him “as if he were her supreme chief and master, and as if she were quite a guilty and unworthy person needing every favour and grace from him.” Miss Swartz and Amelia share pleasure in enacting this internalized submission, and Amelia's prostration continues even after his death, re-emerging in her sacrificial mother role to George Jr. and a “tender little parasite” to Dobbin (684). Amelia considers all three men benevolent patriarchs and is pleased by their acceptance of her. What is imagined as erotic for George and Amelia, fantasies forged in and reproduced by the imperial patriarchal encounter, fetishizes what is in fact a severe form of colonial domination.

These sexual dynamics, Thackeray's narrator suggests, must be expressed through Amelia. As the “best-natured of all” of the young women at Miss Pinkerton's school, and as the noted ironic “heroine of this work,” Amelia represents the norms of Victorian femininity. Had an

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<sup>24</sup> Thackeray explores this dynamic again in *Henry Esmond*, likening the relationship between Lady Castlewood and Henry to slavery. The critique embedded in Amelia's insufferable submission to George is made explicit by Lady Castlewood, as she tells Henry more boldly that great male writers represent women “to be slaves always . . . and even of our own times, as you are still the only lawgivers, I think our sermons seem to say that the best woman is she who bears her master's chains most gracefully” (133). The novel states later that men create great wars to win jewels for the “pair of bright eyes . . . [that] enslave him” (296), suggesting again a strong connection between the marriage plot, history, and imperial conquest.

exemplary figure like Amelia not existed, “what on earth was to have prevented us from putting up Miss Swartz, or Miss Crump, or Miss Hopkins, as heroine in her place!” (11). The incredulity with which the narrator expresses the possibility of this unchosen narrative reiterates through humor the impossibility of Miss Swartz occupying roles normally assigned to white English women. As in several other instances, the narrator makes explicit the machinations of this fiction—the aesthetic and characterological decisions that make a narrative cohere, and make a (supposedly) didactic narrative’s ethical claims comprehensible for Victorian audiences. The twinge of irony located in this parenthetical aside does not come from the novel’s unraveling the notion of heroine; rather, it comes from the assumption that Miss Swartz could never conceivably perform that role in a way suitable for Victorian readers. As Jennifer DeVere Brody writes in *Impossible Purities*, the use of Miss Swartz as a mulatto figure “signals the colonial traces etched in the margins” (28), agreeing that the illustrations mark Miss Swartz’s racialized presence more forcefully than the language does. Specifically, Brody writes that Miss Swartz invokes “the black caricatures in circulation during this period,” including “the romanticized savage” (36). As a figure deemed both excessive (containing too many racialized signifiers) and deficient (without a legible and coherent racial identity), the mulatto figure reflects the complex and contradictory claims on Miss Swartz: “[s]he is black but wealthy; simultaneously devalued and overvalued” (43). Brody suggests that we read Miss Swartz as more central to the novel’s engagement with colonial and racial discourses, not only as a marginalized figure exploited and lampooned by the white characters of the novel, but as a character that sets up most firmly the novel’s engagement with “blackness” as deceit, thereafter evidenced in Rebecca’s adulteress social climbing and the Crawley family’s greed. Brody goes as far as to claim that Rebecca “appears in blackface” in the illustration of Rebecca’s “second appearance in the character of

Clytemnestra,” though this could result from her hiding in shadows behind a curtain (39).

Rebecca is covered in a dark veil in the scene of her gambling, which Brody reads into as well. Though Brody may stretch her evidence in these instances, pairing her readings with language describing Rebecca in extravagant costume reserved previously for jabs at Miss Swartz affirms that “the ‘beautiful’ savage, Miss Swartz . . . transmogrifies into the savage beauty Rebecca in the second half of the book” (40).

The novel would unfold quite differently if George had married Miss Swartz; he would have appeased his father and secured his family inheritance and her larger sum. Miss Swartz’s position as the narrative unchosen—the life unled—must be considered as more central to Thackeray’s metafictional experiment in divergence, missed opportunity, and chance. It was the bowl of rack punch, placed in front of Jos by an invisible waiter; it was Miss Swartz’s blackness and the threat of perceived English impurity that George rejected in favor of a sickeningly submissive white Victorian femininity. When Miss Swartz marries a wealthy Scotsman, the novel circumvents the perceived threat of miscegenation by linking together two racialized groups and preserving the untouched whiteness of the novel’s primary English families.

While the threat of racial mixing is mitigated by a range of factors, the novel’s formal admixtures remain destabilizing and impure. The disjunctive quality of the narrator’s knowledge, abrupt temporal shifts, alternative plotting presented as narrative possibility, and the tension between the demands of language and image each seem to undercut totalizing, authoritative visions of English reality. The nineteenth-century realist novel has been theorized as a site for conditioning and homogenizing private thought.<sup>25</sup> It has been taken to task for its construction and reinforcement of nationhood, particularly those defined by the imperial encounter (Said xii).

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<sup>25</sup> See D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* and Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*.

The heterogeneous form of Thackeray's novel refuses the construction of coherent subjectivity, and his narrational de-mastery has led many critics to argue that the racist representations included in many of Thackeray's writings evidence nothing more than ambivalence of imperial and racial power. In a Bakhtinian reading of this form, Sandy Morey Norton suggests that the novel's heteroglossia displaces any clear political statement, implying that it is reductive to read the novel as an inscription of white English values. In her analysis of Miss Swartz, she writes:

As the narrator disparages Swartz in openly racist terms, he also describes her as 'honest' in contrast to her hostesses; indeed, she is innocent of pursuing George, and she dearly loves Amelia. The idiocy of her behavior and appearance works narratively to highlight the more subtle and malevolent, but equally ridiculous, behavior and appearance of the Osborne sisters and women like them. Swartz appears ridiculous precisely because she is a natural, unsophisticated native . . . in a foreign, European context. (127)

Miss Swartz is hardly "innocent of pursuing George"—we learn of her sexual desire for him in the same chapter that he humiliates her—but more importantly, this interpretation disavows the obvious allusions to colonialist exhibition and damaging racial spectacle that surrounds her "native"-ness. To state it plainly: laughing at Miss Swartz because she exhibits non-white features and a yearning for white respectability is quite different from laughing at George, or Amelia, or even Rebecca for their evident self-centered vices. The argument that everyone equally deserves Thackeray's vicious critical treatment nullifies the heavy-handed significance of race in an imperial era. In fact, Miss Swartz hardly exhibits "idiocy" at all; she does nothing exceptionally external to the norms established and supported by *Vanity Fair*, the novel's imagined space. Even if Thackeray intended to use her character in jest, a critical interpretation

that promotes “idiocy” as her primary characteristic succumbs to the same privileging of English linguistic and cultural norms associated with white propriety. The novel pokes fun at these norms without radically altering or critiquing them; the piling-on of greed and selfish desire allows no pause for an antiracist dialectic. If a reader accepts Miss Swartz’s “idiocy” without considering theoretical and historical criticism that shows how her stupidity is in fact constructed according to racist typing, then the norms that construct these types within literature remain unchallenged.

Rather than producing a coherent English subjectivity *or* playfully unraveling the possibility of a legible political aim, Thackeray’s novel uniquely formulates an aesthetics of indirection that subtly reifies an imperialist worldview centering English epistemologies and norms—even if the English are shown to be flawed, too. Refusing ethical clarity does not release Thackeray’s texts from exploiting global systems of violence for comedic effect. Rather, the proliferation of criticism excusing Thackeray for his representations of non-white persons participates in the project of “colonial unknowing,” theorized by Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein as a “counter-formation” within empire studies that puts pressure on “the specific forms taken by . . . normative acts of ignoring, disavowal, and epistemicide” (1042). These critics suggest that one strategy of empire’s continued claim to reality as centered through whiteness is the strategic use of “willful ignorance . . . deployed over and against relational modes of study and ways of knowing otherwise” (1043). Chalking up the representation of Miss Swartz or Sambo to Thackeray’s imperial background suggests that he doesn’t know better, exculpating him for this demeaning caricature simply because he despises all of his characters, or because other aspects of his writing are admirably complex. Black Britons existed in the nineteenth century, despite their representational lack in realism; alternative claims on “the real” could have been entertained, but Thackeray misses his

opportunity by confining Miss Swartz and Sambo to their caricatured visibility, flattening character to spectacle and continuing epistemic violence.

### Realism, Totality, and Empire

The apprehension to unequivocally state the obvious problems in Thackeray's language and illustration is fairly widespread in Victorian criticism, especially since Thackeray fluctuates in his writings between abolitionist rhetoric and xenophobia. Because he exhibits occasional bursts of critique, or because critics have a difficult time charging beloved white authors with racism, the term encountered most often in scholarship examining race in his works is *ambivalence*. Without reducing the complexity that ambivalence brings to considerations of empire, I want to suggest that this critical tendency secures what Elaine Freedgood calls, following historian Antoinette Burton, "reassuring 'islands of whiteness'" in Victorian studies, "a respite from the demanding ethnic diversity of American Studies" (299). Arguing that imperialism is "*constitutive*" (298) to, not ancillary to or a special interest within, Victorian Studies, she writes, "[e]mpire produces a need for an identity to oppose . . . creolization, miscegenation, and the imagined return of the poorly repressed or suppressed colonized subject. Thackeray's Miss Swartz in *Vanity Fair* is one version of this nightmare" (301).

An explicit and unapologetic indictment of Thackeray's representation of black figures is surprisingly hard to find. Deborah A. Thomas's *Thackeray and Slavery*, for instance, provides a thorough look into the complicated history of Orientalist tropes throughout his fiction, but submits that regardless of the topic, Thackeray was generally averse to strong political moralizing in his fiction. In Thomas's view, he "refused to commit himself . . . to rigid positions regarding the issues of his day" (2). Though Thackeray alludes to slavery through the various ways "people have been reduced to objects" (3), Thomas contends that the issue with

Thackeray's representations of slavery is that they are too general, failing to differentiate between the kinds of servitude in the West Indies, southeast Asia, and the white working classes of England. Thackeray's fiction does, perhaps, "see a subject from more than a single side," a perspective allowing him to simultaneously exploit and critique racist caricatures (2). Her argument, essential as it is for demanding the centrality of slavery to interpretations of Thackeray's fiction, blunts its critique by neglecting to address how this centrist affectation normalizes imperial epistemologies of Otherness. Suggesting that his "treatment of real-life slavery doesn't seem as fair-minded as he intended it to be" (16) disavows the unambiguously racist representations he integrates into his most popular novel, refusing to grapple with the ugly realities that inhere in this history of realist fiction.

Julia Sun-Joo Lee takes up the question of Thackeray's "treatment of real-life slavery" more pointedly, outlining in a chapter on *Pendennis* Thackeray's use of abolitionist rhetoric (most notably, the phrase "only a man and a brother") to compare slave experience to his perceived lack of autonomy in the literary marketplace (56). Lee suggests that "even as Thackeray was depoliticizing a threadbare abolitionist catchphrase, he was simultaneously repoliticizing and reenergizing it, broadening its application to those who participated in the market for *literature*." Beyond the obvious problem with "broadening" a uniquely horrific experience to describe a white man's creative working life, Thackeray's use of abolitionist rhetoric severely wanes after his visit to America, where he was confronted with the lived realities of slavery. Lee finds significant similarities between an image Thackeray illustrates for *Pendennis* where the author's likeness is subjected to a beating with an image of a black figure, identified as Sambo, who is whipped for saving a lamb (68). Comparing his position as a writer to an avaricious reading public and industrial publication system to the violence of slavery satirizes through exaggeration,

and Lee appropriately comments on “Thackeray’s almost chilling ability to detach form from political content, to treat with levity even the most morbid subjects” (72). Following his trip to America in 1852, Thackeray uses slavery as a metaphor for the publication process less frequently. In fact, he asserts a firm separation between his image and a stereotyped image of blackness, trading his earlier language of fraternity and co-suffering for the rhetoric of disgust and difference. In an 1853 letter to his mother, he states, “They are not my men & brethren, these strange people with retreating foreheads, with great obtruding lips & jaws. . . . Sambo is not my man & my brother” (73-4).

*Vanity Fair*, published shortly before Thackeray’s transformative trip to America, showcases Thackeray’s glib usage of racial caricature for humorous or dramatic intent. Noting that critics have been “squeamis[h] about the visibility of the language of ‘race’ and empire” (420), Corri Zoli compellingly argues:

Thackeray’s language is thoroughly Victorian . . . replete with elements of an increasingly ‘scientific’ racial classifying system . . . . Thackeray’s very indelicacy about ‘race’ and imperialism, including his posture as a certain kind of ‘native informant’ who tells of ordinary Victorian obsessions with race, has a curious disarming effect on dominant models of literary history, nationalist myths of autonomous aesthetic culture, and the ‘faux-universalism’ to which the literary canon is still often subtly enlisted . . . (422)

Zoli significantly punctures the notion that one can read *Vanity Fair* without considering the racial dynamics that energize the narration and plot. She extends his scathing critique of the vanities and hypocrisies to the representation of race and empire; however, she retracts some of the damning racism in Thackeray’s work by appealing to his deconstructive, destabilizing form.

She contends that the polyglot, heterogeneous voices competing for ascendancy in the novel make Thackeray's own political motivations difficult to discern.

The formal instabilities outlined as constitutive to the plot structure and reading experience, then, are commonly used to release Thackeray's novels from overt imperialist racism. To clarify, arguing for the author's ambivalence is not necessarily indicative of the critic's prejudices; rather, Thackeray's ironic form engages in a multi-vocality that makes it difficult to state some concepts plainly. Unstable and shifting narrational patterns meet crude, partial, and caricatured sketches, both highlighting the partiality of visions available at any single moment in *Vanity Fair*. Perspectival partiality, unknowability, and ironic form create a reading experience of de-mastery—the narration cannot grab ahold of the plot in its totality, just as neither image nor language can depict a scene or idea as fully as it suggests is possible, and therefore the reader is left piecing together fragments to build a complete world.<sup>26</sup> The text begs for coherence, but fails; the images offer a visual reprieve from this dizzying display of textual indirection, but turns its characters into surface-level objects rather than intimately-known subjects. Embedding irony within its gestures toward knowledge, the novel's form engineers the desire for coherence while destroying its possibility.

Doomed to dissatisfy the reader's desire for wholeness, the novel upholds its promised melancholia. On one side, the novel's moral relativism makes all actions simultaneously reprehensible and justifiable within the social world depicted. On the other, this failed totality

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<sup>26</sup> In an important contrast, Nicholas Dames argues that *Henry Esmond's* use of autobiography in the historical novel depicts “the effort to plot the mind, and to *plot memory*, in such a way as to insure a newly coherent, newly organized psyche . . . a turning away from the enigmas of Wordsworthian memory and a turning toward a cleansed, organized mind free of such uncategorizable detail” (Dames, *Amnesiac* 128). Because Henry narrates his own life history, he underscores the details that unfold to his marriage with Rachel because he already knows his story's ending. The strangely embodied/disembodied, knowing/unknowing narrator of *Vanity Fair*, while using the same language of inevitability, does not reaffirm the fiction of the coherent self in the way autobiography authorizes in *Henry Esmond*.

disappoints because it suggests a theory of history's unrecoverable losses. George's death is an obvious example of loss; the passage narrating the battle that killed him describes little to nothing about warfare, but does shed its ironic tone to lament the violence of "two high-spirited nations" that, even after witnessing the depths of destruction brought about by global conflict, "might be boasting and killing each other still" (Thackeray, *Vanity* 326). Thackeray also suggests that, though we "[a]ll . . . have read of what occurred during that interval," our knowledge of that history is partial because it does not register individual, distinct grievances. Even for cases like the Osbornes' pride and sorrow, a letter delivered just three weeks after George's death reveals to Mr. Osborne that his son thought fondly of him upon entering battle. The language used to articulate George's patrilineal gratitude is restrained, and that language—the material relic of George's history—cannot record the affection with which the letter was written. This affection is invisible, because "[h]is father could not see the kiss George had placed on the superscription of his letter" (353). This sentimental and abstract forgiveness issuing from George just before his death could *only* exist in the fictional "record," as historical writing concerns itself with "famous action" and nationalist praise (326). His letter, formal and kind, is a partial record of Waterloo, and the profundity of this realization belongs to the reader and narrator alone. The characters most affected by his final thoughts cannot access them.

Thackeray's concern with what remains unrecorded in history permeates his fictions. In a wonderful passage weaving together Napoleon's arrival in France from Elba with Amelia's personal history and Sambo's service, Thackeray writes:

how was this intelligence to affect a young lady in Russell Square, before whose door the watchman sang the hours when she was asleep . . . who, if she walked ever so short a distance to buy a ribbon in Southampton Row, was followed by

black Sambo with an enormous cane: who was always cared for, dressed, put to bed, and watched over by ever so many guardian angels, with and without wages.  
(178)

The Battle of Waterloo a foreboding inevitability, this passage directs attention to the well-kept Victorian woman, more visibly central than the unnamed “watchman” or marginalized “black Sambo.” (And if the passage marks those who receive and do not receive wages, respectively, then one could conjecture that Sambo is still enslaved.) The passage blends together the beginnings of a global event with domestic triviality, entwining them as dueling perspectives that violently intermingle later. The highly protected and observed Amelia seems least susceptible to the grand violence of war, and yet, she will be victimized by the event. The somber realization that Amelia cannot know what is bound to happen to her can be extended to the novel’s more general sense that individual histories are lost, even as we look back and attempt to stitch them together through aesthetic renderings.

It should be noted that the desire for coherent narratives of history, nation, and identity are imperialist desires. W.J.T. Mitchell considers art “synecdoche for a much wider range of things” within the imperial situation, as “the concept of empire . . . [is] a name for the total domination of material things and people” (*What Do* 154). Imperial aesthetic production is “an object of radical ambivalence, perfecting the arts of mass death and destruction, conquest, and enslavement of whole populations while also producing the great monuments of civilization along with notions of universal law, human rights, and global harmony” (154). What registers as melancholic loss in Thackeray’s fiction is also the failure of the empire to know its own history, to prevent its own losses, and to live up to its own moral ideals. Situated at the periphery of this failure are empire’s victims, ridiculed for their inability to live up to those ideals because they

have already been marked as Other by some physical attribute (Sambo's grin and "bandy legs") or because their skin color sullies the ideal of English wealth (as in descriptions of Miss Swartz's garish costuming).

Both figures serve their peripheral roles to maintain what Edward Said argues by way of Raymond Williams, "structures of feeling" that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire" (Said 14). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said compares the representation and maintenance of empire to a servant figure, "codified, if only marginally visible . . . whose work is taken for granted but scarcely ever more than named, rarely studied" (63). Said uses the servant figure as an analogy for a broader, unstated but omnipresent consolidation of empire in British literature. The futile attempt at capturing private experiences within large-scale History by examining minor domestic histories promotes a desire for a singular and coherent story. Realist historical novels strive for a totality that cannot be realized; the arresting ruptures of novelistic "strange sight" make this attempt at totalizing vision clear by marking its impossibility. When Miss Swartz stares back through the page, the illustration locks the reader in an uncomfortable engagement that simultaneously registers the viewer's assumed mastery and the object's challenge to it.

Despite linkages between empire and totality, building the empire was not a coherent and smooth process. Disjunctions, diversions, and idiosyncrasies abounded, and the effort of imperial mimesis was not only to record these singularities, but to rework them into semi-consolidated distinctions between English and Other. Thackeray's novel lacks a firm "logic" of empire in its diversionary impulses, which is perhaps how his works become "ambivalent" in critical discourse, but he does show the disparate approaches to cultural threats brought about by

imperialism. The empire does not function in any one particular way in reality; as Rey Chow shows,

[w]hat is problematic is our attempt to point at [symbolic orders like imperialism] as if they were one consistent manipulator that is trying to fool us consistently. Our fascination with the native, the oppressed, the savage and all such figures is therefore a desire to hold onto an unchanging certainty somewhere outside our own ‘fake’ experience. It is a desire for being ‘non-duped’, which is a not-too-innocent desire to seize control. (344)

The typing of black figures in *Vanity Fair* shows one effort at creating monolithic representations that disavow complexity. On the other hand, falsely “knowing” these characters in fiction would restore an imperialist form of epistemological control as well. Gayatri Spivak warns, “No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self” (253).

Here, then, is the interpretive quagmire of representing social life under imperialism. If empire is a totalizing machine that seeks omniscience, one solution may be representing individualization, peculiarity, strangeness. On the other hand, attempts to limit interpretive focus to the narrow and particular sites of imperial power for the sake of accuracy *also* typify an imperialist response—drawing limits and enforcing boundaries around objects of study (Freedgood 304). The tension between desiring the whole and demarcating the particular is endemic to realism, as a set of aesthetic conventions striving towards closeness to the feeling of consciousness. The partiality and wholeness in tension throughout *Vanity Fair* energizes the reading experience and provides an exemplary case study in the problems of narrating the

imperial situation. Describing the dissatisfaction of Thackeray's conclusions, Ina Ferris suggests that this failure is, in fact, constitutive of the form rather than unique to Thackeray:

Realism is rooted in suspicion and in history—in history as suspicion. . . . From its beginnings, realist narrative has defined itself as process (a seeing-of-the-world) rather than as product (a thing seen). As its anticonventional stance suggests, its logic is dialectical, implying no end but a continuing process of redefinition, so rendering provisional, partial, and vulnerable each definition arrived at on the way. . . . realism is the mode of *différance*, existing only in difference and deferral. (294)

Again, the critical consensus avows Thackeray is at his *most* realist when he announces his fictionality because the enterprise of realism confesses to its impossibility, its limits. The irresolvable tensions of history and fiction are formally expressed in the multivocality of the narration's irony, unraveling its own didacticisms, marking its own futility, questioning its own aims. Thackeray lays bare the realist's pursuit of omniscience, making explicit the text's function as a consumable object in a literary marketplace that demands certain aesthetic standards.

Rather than promoting a characterization that assimilates Miss Swartz and Sambo to English norms of realist subjectivity, then, this chapter also seeks to "reopen the fracture" (Spivak 254) brought about by Thackeray's aesthetic decision to exploit these stereotypes in a novel that frequently gets away with doing so because it interweaves irony and formal demastery within those representations. Reading between the dual forms of representation used in his illustrated novels, Thackeray reveals which persons are available to realist complexity within English realism and which are flattened by the narrative machinery to be exploited as objects. As he puts it, "When the great house tumbles down, these miserable wretches fall under it

unnoticed" (Thackeray, *Vanity* 372); but perhaps, the critic's interruption can destroy this aspiration to totality within the "great house" of realist fiction, so that these "miserable wretches" within it can be seen.

## Chapter Three: Dickens's Stereoscopic Realism

if seeing is believing not seeing is believing too and when you don't see you may  
fully believe you're not remembered

—Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*

This *negative* is now give birth to a *positive*,—this mass of contradictions to assert  
its hidden truth in a perfect harmonious affirmation of the realities of Nature.

Behold the process!

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Stereoscope and Stereoscopic Photographs*

*Little Dorrit* opens with an urban scene brimming with eyes but devoid of people, as  
Charles Dickens presents the novel's pervasive staring trope:

Everything in Marseilles, and about Marseilles, had stared at the fervid sky, and  
been stared at in return, until a staring habit had become universal there. Strangers  
were stared out of countenance by staring white houses, staring white walls,  
staring white streets, staring tracts of arid road, staring hills from which verdure  
was burnt away. The only things to be seen not fixedly staring and glaring were  
the vines drooping under their load of grapes. These did occasionally wink a little,  
as the hot air barely moved their faint leaves. (*Little Dorrit* 39)

In this strange opening, the city is unnervingly alive. The “staring habit” paradoxically animates  
and immobilizes the environment. There is not a familiar or comforting image in the passage;  
Marseilles burns under a “fervid sky,” and the blinding whiteness of the buildings makes readers  
wince. We do not wish to stare back. Dickens expands the function of the stare to “glaring,”  
attaching it to social judgment. Just as the reader acclimates to this unpleasant atmosphere,  
Dickens frustrates our understanding with a slight reversal—everything stares except the “vines  
drooping” in the passage, which “wink.” A sense of the Gothic hangs upon the real but is not  
fully indulged, as the whimsy of the vines pulls us out of the narration's intensity.

Throughout *Little Dorrit*, the reader hovers at this threshold of realism and the Gothic. Representations of architectural space and social life, fraught with bureaucratic inefficiencies, threats of literal and domestic imprisonment, and conditions of debt commingle with caricatured criminal figures, jilted lovers, and disembodied eyes. Dickens is no stranger to the cross-contamination of generic conventions, and the nineteenth-century realist novel regularly integrates Gothic images to externalize repressed sexuality, create us/them binaries, and shore up idealized identities. In this opening paragraph, however, the Gothic is hardly externalized in a consolidated figure or monstrous other. Rather, it saturates through a visual act, staring, that conveys uncanniness interacting with referentially realist space.

The culture of looking in the nineteenth-century made uncanny impressions available to realist representation. In particular, pervasive staring in *Little Dorrit* relates to discourses of the stereoscope contemporaneous with the novel's serialization. Beyond the stare/ster-eoscope homophone, the stereoscope converts flat, photographic representations of external reality into illusions of thickened depth that, as one advertisement in the first issue of *Little Dorrit* claims, puts "you under the fascination that you are contemplating reality itself" (Dickens, *Project Boz*). Yet, several experiential accounts on the device emphasize the strange, alienating sight generated by the instrument's manipulation of binocular disparity. Essays published in *Household Words* and, across the pond, in *The Atlantic* bear witness to widespread Victorian confluences of realism and uncanny visual alterity. Through these coterminous accounts, this chapter shows how staring in the novel fixes and flattens scenes to construct an eerie photographic quality refusing epistemological closure. The stare becomes an empty carrier, a signifier without a signified, in tension with positivist notions that observation is an objective practice. This incongruence supplies a metaphor for Dickens's modulation between interior, temporalized depth and static,

imprisoning surface, while also constructing a theory of fiction that lays bare the illusion of mimetic totality.

While his characters believe sight helps build knowledge—why Arthur “resolved to watch Little Dorrit and know more of her story” (Dickens, *Little Dorrit* 96) before first approaching her—staring in the novel recreates the “fixing” of a photographic image while refuting the notion that doing so leads to new knowledge. The novel resists nineteenth century positivist objectivity precisely because reality, as Dickens shows, is psychological, intersubjective, and irreducible to vision alone. Just as the popular stereoscope produced dark, uncanny byproducts in its realistic views, *Little Dorrit*’s realism attends to the absences, gaps, and invisible meanings that underlie common English reality. The meanings of these staring scenes escape the eye while, paradoxically, being entrapped within it. Rather than epitomizing “disorder, carelessness, and signs of depleted power” (Rosenberg 32-3), *Little Dorrit* offers an experimental form, stereoscopic realism, which calls attention to the disjunctive partial visions orchestrating a descriptively-thickened realist experience. Staring’s narrative ruptures illuminate the impossibility of representing a perceptually multiple, and therefore infinite, world.

#### “Quasi-Modernist” Visions in the Nineteenth Century

There was a pervasive sense in the nineteenth century, bolstered by empiricist and positivist theories, that objective knowledge could be accessed by and through human sight. Scientists explored the workings of the human eye, a complex technology in its own right; inventors embraced the model of the human eye in order to engineer devices that fix, mirror, and reproduce images of the world; and intellectuals examined the diverse and ever-shifting relationships between the observer, visual object, and empirical knowledge. The nineteenth century’s fascination with the visual inevitably ushered in as many skeptical theories of the

reliability and limits of human perception. There were “huge numbers of experiments . . . conducted on the physiology of the eye and on the processes of vision,” which resulted in the enigmatic discovery that “the more that was learned about vision, the more unreliable it seemed to be” (Horton 3). The language surrounding the visual perpetuated the cultural desire for more exact, realistic images. Louis Daguerre famously commented to Joseph Nicéphore Niépce that he was “burning with desire to see [his] experiments from nature” (Batchen viii), emphasizing the voracious drive to produce realistic images through a method that was accurate, quick, and relatively inexpensive. This desire was, even, at times, a destructive one. Several early photographers and inventors went blind after years of experimentation; others died handling toxic chemicals such as cyanide during the development process (Watson 246).

As histories of the development of photography and realism make abundantly clear, however, this desire for better, more realistic views was destined to remain unfulfilled. There was no ubiquitous reality “out there” to mimic. Nancy Armstrong contends that fiction writers of the nineteenth century first constructed novel images using representations already presented by photography, so that fiction and photography exist in a circular, co-constitutive process of archiving “reality” by producing “image-objects” (*Fiction* 27). She proposes a dialectic of object and image, in which the archive built by these object-images determines the metric by which observers evaluate other visual representations. In this theory, then, there is no original image. The measurement of realistic photography is other images; the measurement of realism is simply other works of realism. The critical work on visuality and photography of the nineteenth century reiterates this anti-origin. Geoffrey Batchen outlines the paradoxical position of the photograph as both a drawing and a system of representation, natural and cultural, active and passive, which ultimately “undoes the distinction between copy and original” (69). In his study of the historical

and theoretical underpinnings of photography, Batchen seeks an ontology of the form that takes into account its multiplicity as reflection, constitution, reproduction, and reconceptualization at once. Both Batchen and Armstrong show the difficulty of writing a history of the photograph precisely because “light-writing” has multiple origins, with each attempt at creating image out of light working with different materials and purposes (Batchen 101).

Daniel A. Novak similarly asks readers and spectators to consider the composite nature of both the photograph and the novel form throughout the period, both of which appear whole but are in fact fragmentary and soldered together. Using a Marxist-Hegelian lens, his argument takes for granted the “homologous” nature of photography and the novel to focus instead on a fictional “re-memering” that glosses over inconsistencies in both forms and in capitalist reproduction (63). Novak compellingly shows that in our readings of both the photograph and the novel, and more specifically in *Little Dorrit*, we conveniently forget those fragmentary, dismembered details that conflict with our own totalizing telling of the narrative. In re-readings, those details surprise us because we have forgotten them in our tendency to make the work whole. This fragmentariness is part of what drives the interpretive process and the desire to return to the text.<sup>27</sup>

These analyses benefit from a poststructuralist suspicion of positivism, origin, and totality that is a critical commonplace today. Even if the photograph left many desires unfulfilled in the nineteenth century, prompting the production of more and more images, the drive to continue perfecting the art was infectious. Many believed the photograph to be “an instrument of revelation” rather “than of deceit” and encouraged the continued efforts to improve upon it

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<sup>27</sup> Novak’s analysis leans heavily on Marxist critique and processes of circulation and reproduction to describe this narrative phenomenon. For a psychoanalytic approach that reaches similar conclusions, see Peter Brooks’s “Freud’s Masterplot.”

(Green-Lewis 3). “As to truth,” writes the *Gazette de France* of Daguerre’s images, “they are above all” (Newhall 19). While the distinctions between painting and photography were, at times, unclear—portraits were regularly touched up by artists to eliminate signs of aging and blemishes, and special lighting was used to “make the effect more painterly” (69)—the notion that photography could capture and replicate from nature what humans could and could not see themselves was sweeping. An article published in *All the Year Round* after Dickens’s death demonstrates the persistence of confidence in photography’s acuity: “Not only does photography reproduce, with absolute perfection, details which the most scrupulous eye-work could not trace without errors, but it actually sees what is invisible; the sensitive plate receives impressions which altogether escape the human eye” (“Some New” 89). The essay’s claims are hardly unique; many granted photography superior capacities over human perception, as its chemical processes brought material form to once invisible realities.

Narrative description borrows the perceptual transformations enabled by photographic technologies of the nineteenth century, and several critics point to Dickens’s descriptive resonances with these technologies for various narrational effects. J. Hillis Miller writes of *Sketches by Boz*, “No one can doubt the ‘photographic’ accuracy of these descriptions. Dickens has obviously seen what he describes and reports it accurately with the good journalist’s sharp eye for detail” (Miller, “The Fiction” 87). Murray Baumgarten directs his attention to the illustrations Dickens includes in his novels, mentioning that “[i]nstead of the static picturesque scene represented with the aid of the Claude glass, Dickens’s illustrations resemble the moving image of the diorama and Panorama shows that were the buzz of London in the 1840s and 1850s” (220). Ronald Thomas reminds us that in *Pictures from Italy*—a title that positions the text in relation to image—“Dickens himself recalls his own dreamlike trip to Venice . . . as a

‘succession of novelties’ and ‘a crowd of objects’ that would suddenly appear and just as suddenly ‘dissolve, like a view in a magic lantern’” (35). Each critic uses a popular technology of Dickens’s lifetime to metaphorize certain effects of narration: the photograph signifies “accuracy” and the transcribing of minutiae in Miller’s reading, the panorama suggests urban movement for Baumgarten, and the magic lantern emphasizes ephemerality and spectatorial enchantment.

Dickens was fascinated with new visual technologies and was involved (at the very least, editorially) in discourse promoting their magic and intrigue. But they also produced anxiety; he famously ironizes the realism of photographs in *Oliver Twist*, as Mrs. Bedwin remarks, “painters always make ladies out prettier than they are, or they wouldn’t get any custom, child. The man that invented the machine for taking likenesses might have known *that* would never succeed; it’s a deal too honest” (90). George Dodd, a writer for Dickens’s periodical *Household Words*, expresses concerns about photography regarding forgery, counterfeit money, and illegitimate duplicates (problems that are examined in *Little Dorrit* as well). He mentions that a photograph can create a facsimile of ancient manuscripts that work as well as the originals for half the cost, a worry for antiquarians. National and colonial interests might be at stake with this technology, as the Bank of England could be undermined by counterfeit notes. Imported luxury goods may decrease in value as manufacturers can simply “print ornamental designs on silks and woollen stuffs by means of photography” (Dodd 245). He even mentions that the photograph serves as a better witness than the human in catastrophes and crimes. Dickens and his contemporaries appear, at times, quite anxious over the role of the copy in dislodging the authority and aura of an original. Dodd ends his 1853 essay exclaiming photography is “[s]trange, scientific, mournful, all at once!”

Dickens's ambivalence toward the photograph is shown metaphorically in his essay, "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody." In this piece, Dickens condemns the lack of political accountability during the Crimean War, uses photographic metaphors to substantiate his claims against national indiscretion: "And this brings me back to Nobody; to the great irresponsible, guilty, wicked, blind giant of this time . . . . Think of the history of which that abomination is at once the beginning and the end; of the dark social scenes daguerreotyped in it" (337). *Little Dorrit*'s original title was *Nobody's Fault*, and many of the chapter titles retain this figural "Nobody," on whom the mismanagement of the Crimean War is blamed. This placeholder nestles into the bureaucratic nightmare of the Circumlocution Office, making it so that information is difficult to extract because Nobody has access to it, and action is impossible to command because Nobody is in charge. The histories of Nobody, he declares here, have been accompanied by daguerreotypes of "dark social scenes," memorialized and mourned. The daguerreotype as metaphor, then, implies a presence of social effect where there is an absence of cause, signifying knowledge and mystery simultaneously. Dickens names Nobody in order to materialize and paradoxically give name to what is consistently absent from discussions of accountability.

Between the figure Nobody, the Crimean War and bureaucratic mismanagement, and its contemporaneity with *Little Dorrit*, Dickens might have been thinking of the obfuscation of the daguerreotype when writing his novel. One contemporaneous reviewer found this to be the case, and criticizes *Little Dorrit* for its inability to achieve a reality effect precisely because the novel mimics the photograph:

the artistic fault of Little Dorrit is that it is no tale. It neither begins nor ends—it has no central interest, no legitimate catastrophe, and no modelling of the plot into

a whole. This is the fault of Mr. Dickens as an artist . . . . His characters remind us of the cheap theatrical prints of our schoolboy days, and of the artificial way in which boys used to act a play in the nursery . . . . His actors are never in repose, never relax the stony stare, never vary from the monotonous rigidity of matter or manner . . . . The hard mechanical effort to make out character by elaborately stippling a single feature or a single expression, gives only the unnatural life of a daguerreotype” (“LITTLE DORRIT” 15).

The novel’s comparison to a daguerreotype here works differently than in Dickens’s own use of the term. Instead, the reviewer emphasizes the novel’s flatness and automatism. The daguerreotype functions not as ideological concealment of reality but as a dehumanizing entity which contradicts reality. Realism in the novel, according to this reviewer, should offer more than the flatness and “rigidity” that Dickens delivers in *Little Dorrit*.<sup>28</sup> These contemporaneous uses of the daguerreotype as a metaphor for realism provide one instance of the differing conventions and definitions of the genre. Dickens’s reviewer insists on a vision of reality that is at once totalizing (making “the plot into a whole”) and diverse; his aversion to the “stippling” effect, wherein Dickens highlights and overdetermines a single feature in his characters, suggests that realism contains mutability and change, occasionally “relax[ing] the stony stare.” As Dehn Gilmore shows, this “stippling” effect was one used by miniature painters that would be deemed unrealistic. Quoting John Ruskin, who determined that “the stipple of the miniature painter would be offensive on features of the life size” (672), Gilmore explains through the life-size

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<sup>28</sup> Alex Woloch contends that this flattening effect helps Dickens juggle several effects within his complicated novels. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* argues that Dickens is able to attend to both his characters’ intricate interconnectivity and their unique, often eccentric psychologies through processes of fixing and flattening minor characters to contrast the roundedness and complexity of his protagonists (149-50).

painting that Dickens was well-versed in painterly techniques used to create illusions of solidity and manipulated them to express “doubts about the reality of one’s perceptions” (671). Dickens’s reviewer misses a central idea of *Little Dorrit* and of Dickens’s general approach to representation. By refusing to see the world as fragmented and incomplete, the novel—which posits that England’s institutions and perceptions are precisely those things—is a failure in the reviewer’s eyes.

If he was enamored and mystified of visual technology in the period, Dickens may also have been considering the stereoscope in *Little Dorrit*, one of the most popular visual devices in the mid-nineteenth-century. “Unless Victorian photographs lie,” writes Susan Horton, “by 1850 every well-appointed Victorian parlor had a stereoscope or two, offering viewers an experience of what came to be called the reality effect” (Horton 5). The device was beloved by Queen Victoria, who “was personally so enthusiastic that Brewster presented to her a specially built viewer,” and approximately 500,000 were sold throughout the century (Newhall 114). The advertisement published in *Little Dorrit* boasts of its “reality effect,” as it accesses “[t]he living smile, the characteristic expression, the distinctiveness of individual existence . . . in depth, in detail, in truth” (*Project Boz*). In fact, the device’s realism made it unpopular with artistic photographers; “[i]ts very virtue, that of creating an astonishing illusion of depth, is felt to be too close to reality” (Newhall 115). Like the serialized novel, its mass appeal and easy distribution led to its success, and its reality effect stimulated audiences.

The precision and recording techniques of these visual devices meant that photography created an undiscerning permanent record. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake and Oliver Wendell Holmes both believed that the photograph “indiscriminately sets down any available detail before the lens” which “represents the world in a way that is simply heedless to what human observers find

‘most important,’ the centers that give their experience of the world its structure” (Ellenbogen 124). The photograph in either case is too diffusive, too detailed, and too impartial in its function. Its capacity to record anything included within a scene dissolves any organizing principle that concentrates and “centers” meaning. Eugene Delacroix, too, criticizes photography’s baggy plenitude as an “inability to make a picture that provides a proper whole—a coordinated ensemble that comes into being under the guidance of circumscribed ideas” (125).

Oliver Wendell Holmes, who designed his own version of the stereoscope, reparatively reads the device’s diffusively decentered perception to titillate potential buyers. He realized the stereoscope produces a “quasi-modernist” vision that “mark[s] the medium as a form of alien incoherence . . . . point[ing] toward a different account of photographic truth” (*Soundings* 126). This newly-revealed “truth” is binocular disparity, a discovery credited to the stereoscope’s inventors, Charles Wheatstone and Sir David Brewster. Binocular disparity produces depth perception. Each eye, these scientists independently found, perceives a distinct image that is consolidated mentally. The viewed object or landscape thickens cognitively as both eyes overcorrect to form material solidity and three-dimensionality. The stereoscope simply recreates this process using doubled, slightly dissimilar photographs positioned at the appropriate angle for overcorrection to occur. Though banal to us now, explications of this process’s psychological and phenomenological effects in the Victorian era were full of philosophical insight. The principle of binocular disparity proves that normal human vision is not singular and secure. Rather, human vision involves a constant negotiation between doubled perceptions to perceive an object’s materiality.<sup>29</sup> Holmes’s “quasi-modernist” view through the stereoscope is one that

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<sup>29</sup> It should be mentioned that the stereoscope depends upon doubled images, much like *Little Dorrit*’s plot depends upon twins or doubled figures. See Elaine Showalter, “Guilt, Authority, and the Shadows of *Little Dorrit*” for a take on how the inclusion of doubled figures allows Dickens to explore psychological depth without performing the role of omniscient surveillor in his fiction.

recognizes the disjunctive doubled vision that creates human perceptual experience. To put it another way: any view is already two.

The disjunctive effect of the stereoscope brought about changes in how looking related to subjectivity and power. The stereoscope and devices like it were “in fact bound up in *non-veridical* theories of vision that effectively annihilate a real world” (Crary 14). In particular, the stereoscope rearranges one’s relationship to space and “presupposes perceptual experience to be essentially an apprehension of differences” (120). While it purported to align “the real with the optical” (124), both Wheatstone and Brewster announced that the convergence” of stereographic doubles “might not actually be secure” (124). This insecurity was often a mimetic failure, flattening what should have appeared three-dimensional into defamiliarized palimpsests. Even the composition of the stereograph evinces construction rather than mimetic representation, as objects were arranged in particular ways to make the stereograph work properly. The stereoscope depended upon material excess within a scene so that the eye had something to focus on, meaning “the most intensive experience of the stereoscopic image coincides with an object-filled space, with a material plenitude that bespeaks a nineteenth-century bourgeois horror of the void” (125).

The “horror of the void” and Holmes’s experience of “alien incoherence” establishes the stereoscope’s unnerving implications for nineteenth-century viewers. The optical illusions created by newly-invented visual technologies were inflected with Gothicized language that transformed understandings of the eye and mind. As Terry Castle argues, the influx of discourse on phantasmagoria—“Spectral Realities,” as Thomas Carlyle puts it (26)—involved a transmigration from externally visible ghosts to “something wholly internal or subjective: the phantasmic imagery of the mind” (29). Castle’s essay catalogues the heavy usage of

phantasmagoria throughout the period to draw a psychological trajectory into Freudian mental schemas, wherein the dark hauntings of the unconscious are, in part, just another “crypto-supernaturalism of early nineteenth-century psychology” (59). Castle focuses her reading on the magic lantern, a proto-cinematic technology with which Dickens was enamored. Both the magic lantern and the stereoscope encapsulate the period’s perverse fascination with the easily-collapsible and increasingly false binaries of the invisible and visible, the imaginary and the real, the psychologically interior and the observationally external.

Holmes’s writing in *The Atlantic*, however, sensationalizes stereographic strangeness, exploiting Gothic conventions to accentuate the uncanny phenomenology of observing through this technology. Even creating a stereograph is described as though it were a climactic revelation in a Gothic novel:

We were just now stereographed, ourselves, at a moment’s warning, as if we were fugitives from justice. A skeleton shape, of about a man’s height, its head covered with a black veil, glided across the floor, faced us, lifted its veil, and took a preliminary look. When we had grown sufficiently rigid in our attitude of studied ease . . . when, I say, we were all right, the spectral Mokanna dropped his long veil, and his waiting-slave put a sensitive tablet under its folds. The veil was then again lifted, and the two great glassy eyes stared at us once more for some thirty seconds. The veil then dropped again; but in the mean time the shrouded sorcerer had stolen our double image; we were immortal. Posterity might thenceforth inspect us (if not otherwise engaged), not as a surface only, but in all our dimensions as an undisputed *solid* man of Boston. (*Soundings* 145-6, emphasis in original)

The process Holmes describes is quite frightful. The subjects of the stereograph become “fugitives,” engaged in a vague transgression with a “skeleton shape” as their master. They remain “rigid,” corpse-like, as the photographer moves in and out of visibility through his “black veil.” Holmes’s description summons exoticism and the Gothic through the Death-Mokanna spectral form that “has stolen” something essential from these subjects.<sup>30</sup> The photographic object itself is deemed magical, described as a “sensitive tablet” that produces an “immortal” outcome. The result of this Gothic encounter is the stereograph, which will reveal for decades to come that the subjects photographed were “*solid*,” material, real in their three-dimensionality. Strangely, then, the stereograph’s capacity to capture too much within a scene, to take too much from its subjects, becomes its virtue. It constructs an image of reality both visual and tactile, creating a disturbingly haptic closeness to its subjects. As Holmes writes, “By means of these two different views of an object, the mind, as it were, *feels round it* and gets an idea of its solidity. We clasp an object with our eyes . . . and then we know it to be something more than a surface” (142).<sup>31</sup>

Dickens was well aware of the magic and malfunction of the stereoscope beyond its advertisement in his serializations. In two essays published in *Household Words*, frequent contributors Henry Morley and W.H. Wills mentions the stereoscope’s claims to “ideas of form, solidity, and distance” as well as its proto-cinematic effects. The writers detail a viewing experience that involves moving dissimilar images back and forth within the device to create the

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<sup>30</sup> The “spectral Mokanna” likely refers to a nineteenth-century poem by Thomas Moore, titled *Lalla-Rookh*, which contained a section entitled “The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan.” The figure is from the 8<sup>th</sup> century in Persia, but was alluded to throughout the nineteenth century in poetry and theater. According to *Merry’s Museum and Parley’s Magazine* in 1852, he was known by “a thick and impenetrable veil” used either to hide his powerful magic or, according to his “enemies,” to conceal deformity (79).

<sup>31</sup> See John Plunkett’s “Feeling Seeing’: Touch, Vision and the Stereoscope.” Plunkett argues that discursive connotations of vision and touch regarding the stereoscope actually reified empiricism by fetishizing sight rather than challenging its objectivity. His argument counters Jonathan Crary’s influential assertions on the device and the culture of observation in the nineteenth century more broadly.

illusion of an “an active sparring match” or “an industriously sewing woman” (“Photography” 60). The second of their essays, “The Stereoscope,” explains its functioning in layman’s terms before transitioning to an allegory of its discovery, particularly regarding binocular disparity. In their digression, the writers recall the device’s penchant for trickery and deception so useful in other sensationalist accounts of its effect:

The surest way to get a secret out of nature—if one is clever enough to do it—is to overreach her: to entrap her into a confession by compelling her to work under unheard of conditions. She cannot go to work on fresh material of your own choosing without betraying some part of her mode of setting about business. If all the information that you want is not to be had by playing the mysterious mother one trick, try her with another and another. The secrets of double vision, which could never have been either thought out or discovered by a mere watching of nature at her daily work, have been wormed out of her by such tricks or such experiments. (38-9)

Nature, the feminized guardian of binocular vision, must be beguiled and forced into divulging her secret workings. The language reflects the masculine conquest associated with scientific inquiry throughout the nineteenth century, and also hearkens to Dickens’s own interweaving of violence and humor in his fiction.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, though, the essayists commend the stereoscope’s inventors for their experimentation in forms outside of empirical observation, which they allow might offer better views of reality. In breaking with conventionally passive modes of spectatorship, “mere watching,” the inventors of the stereoscope approach reality more closely.

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<sup>32</sup> See John Carey’s *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens’ Imagination*.

Morley and Wills write in the same essay that a “social history of optical discoveries . . . would be co-extensive with a history of the black arts—dark sciences that often get their darkness out of light” (37). Darkness twinned with light, compulsion twinned with humor—Dickens’s prose, too, engages with these terms as they collapse into ambivalence. While the optical discoveries of his day advance the ability to capture light and create more exact representations, the photograph’s ability to “see” what humans originally cannot suggests that reality is subject to uncanny transmutations. The familiarity of the real dissolves, and the unrealities within perception surface. In its ability to transform the two-dimensionality of an image in ways that are simultaneously realistic and unnatural, stereoscopic vision provides Dickens with a way of viewing and describing a real world steeped in ambiguity. As he engages with realist experimentation in *Little Dorrit*, he uses the cultural discourse surrounding photography and the stereoscope to explore the mysteries, illusions, and deceptions that undergird vision and representational reality in the nineteenth century.

#### An Uncanny World

Returning to the opening passage of the novel that begins this chapter, Dickens immediately situates readers in a referentially exact but atmospherically defamiliarized space. Unlike Pip’s opening graveyard narration in *Great Expectations* or David’s opening chapter announcement, “I Am Born,” *Little Dorrit* brings us first to a world without any people, but with many eyes: “Strangers were stared out of countenance by staring white houses, staring white walls, staring white streets, staring tracts of arid road, staring hills from which verdure was burnt away” (*Little Dorrit* 39). Raymond Williams notices that Dickens, in ways that differ from his literary peers, represents “writing as a way of seeing . . . the city as a destructive animal, a monster, utterly beyond the human scale” (23). This is accomplished by depicting a city “in

which its human features, often compressed or distorted, are most visible in the shapes and aspects of its physical architecture” (22). In fixing the reader and the space through staring, this first passage constructs an environment deemed paralyzing and partially illegible. The narration puts readers on the defensive, weaving suspicion into our understanding of the novel from the beginning. This suspicion is maintained throughout by a secret will, many criminal figures (one of whom is quite violent), a scorned ex-lover, a suicide, a bad financial deal, the collapse of an entire house, and a persistent sense of imprisonment.

The question arises, of course, when reading this wonderfully weird opening: are we reading a work of realism? What indications are we given that *Little Dorrit* achieves the verisimilitude and everydayness necessary for its designation as such? Does the uncanniness, typically attributable to works of romance and the Gothic, preclude the novel’s reality? The question of Dickens’s position within the realist canon is certainly not without debate, even during his own period and across his oeuvre.<sup>33</sup> To the extent that realism describes “a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and particular places” (Watt 31), Dickens’s novels belong. He devotes long passages to his historical-social environments. His protagonists are fleshed out and situated by gender, class, ethnicity, and rank, even if his characters are more remembered by their singular eccentricities. The “presentation” of his world is detailed, if opaque. While it is debatable what kind of morality Dickens dictates, if any, most find that Dickens shines a narrative light on certain social structures and ideologies that are in desperate need of rethinking. He does not consistently offer a call to action or an alternate plan, but he certainly exposes several political faults. It is his

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<sup>33</sup> Dickens’s colleague and competitor, W.M. Thackeray, vouches for a realism of character in *The Pickwick Papers*, declaring that Dickens depicted “true character under false names” (Collins 38); later that same year, he remarks that Nancy in *Oliver Twist* represents “the most unreal fantastic personage” (46). Thackeray’s potential envy aside, it is evident that Dickensian character in its eccentricity and melodrama provokes questions about character plausibility.

“powers of generalization and abstraction” (Trilling 589) directed toward actually-existing social structures that make *Little Dorrit* realistic, if strange; its “abstractness is [its] actuality” (590).

Another part of what connects *Little Dorrit*, despite its weirdly Gothic narration, to realist representation is its referentiality: *Little Dorrit* is structured around the Marshalsea prison, a for-profit debtor’s prison that closed only two decades before the novel was written. Dickens stages the plot in known locales to make claims about individual experience and its relation to systems of power. If we accept the argument that realism engages in a process of world-building offered by Anna Kornbluh in “The Realist Blueprint,” imploring its readers to revise—as in, re-see—their existing preconceptions about how the world functions and who it supports, then Dickens’s constructions of London, Venice, and other urban sites as uncanny in *Little Dorrit* ask what it is about his world that Dickens finds strangely unsettling. Why use uncanny language to discuss debtor’s prison, the Circumlocution Office, the Angel-in-the-prison figure, and international cycles of trade, debt, and failure? What is embedded within social reality that disrupts and destabilizes the solidity of individual perspective, that makes one vulnerable to spectres and monstrous architecture, that haunts and returns without warning?

In his singular work of aesthetic criticism, Sigmund Freud mentions realist fiction and its relationship to the uncanny. His definition of the uncanny is difficult to specify, as Freud shows how the term collapses into “ambivalence” when read through different languages (“The Uncanny” 624).<sup>34</sup> Even his attempt to pin down a few examples of this “quality of feeling” (619) results in a shifting of origin and meaning; he marks the uncanny as a doubling, a repetition compulsion, an unlikely recurring coincidence, a symbolic manifestation of castration anxiety,

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<sup>34</sup> In an uncanny linguistic parallel with *Little Dorrit*, Freud mentions that the Italian and Portuguese definitions of the term can only be described as “circumlocutions” (621) and neglects to record them.

the womb, and a term that encompasses all of the above without necessarily conflating them.<sup>35</sup> It is a wonderful example, like so many of Freud's studies, of working out the concept through the act of writing. When he approaches the question of how literary genres more generally co-opt this effect, he remarks of realist texts, "as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality . . . he accepts all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life; and everything that would have an uncanny effect in reality has it in his story" (641). He acknowledges that writers often violate their contracts with readers by "deceiv[ing] us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth, and then after all overstep[ping] the bounds of possibility." Freud sees evidence of manipulation in realism, in which the writer "increase[s] his effect and multipl[ies] it far beyond what could ever happen in reality." The recognition of this deception only happens after its effects have already taken place on the reader, leading to a "feeling of dissatisfaction." The remainder of the essay works to unsettle the boundary dividing reality and imagination. In psychoanalytic theory, the two are largely interchangeable; psychological life is, despite strange confluences, repetitions, displacements, and hallucinations, as real as the material world, and it produces demonstrable, perceivable effects on that world. The terms of reality are as destabilized as the term "uncanny" is.

The reality effect created by the stereoscope astonished viewers in the era of *Little Dorrit*'s serialization, but as shown in popular accounts, easily tipped into descriptions of uncanny sublimity. Oliver Wendell Holmes's bizarre description of the device's effects exemplify this experience:

The first effect of looking at a good photograph through a stereoscope is a surprise such as no painting ever produced. The mind feels its way into the very

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<sup>35</sup> A fascinating analysis of Freud's shifting definitions throughout his essay is found in H el ene Cixous's "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*."

depths of the picture. The scraggy branches of a tree in the foreground run out at us as if they would scratch our eyes out. The elbow of a figure stands forth so as to make us almost uncomfortable. Then there is such a frightful amount of detail, that we have the same sense of infinite complexity which Nature gives us. A painter shows us masses; the stereoscopic figure spares us nothing,— all must be there, every stick, straw, scratch, as faithfully as the dome of St. Peter's, or the summit of Mont Blanc, or the ever-moving stillness of Niagara. The sun is no respecter of persons or of things. (*The Stereoscope* 21)

Holmes's narrated image is violent—it seeks to harm, to make “uncomfortable.” He links vision with a creeping tangibility, as the “mind feels its way” into the space as a person blinded by darkness finds their way through an unfamiliar room. A device for parlor entertainment becomes a disturbing consciousness of Nature's “infinite complexity,” and thereby a recognition that despite objectification and standardization, there will undoubtedly remain elements of the world inaccessible to human understanding. Holmes describes a surplus of visual information that overwhelms the observer, leveling in its representational processes the distinctions between “persons” and “things.” The stereograph depicts a detailed replication of external existence that transcends the individual's capacity for comprehension.

In its ability to transform the two-dimensionality of an image in ways that are simultaneously realistic and unnatural, producing depth and strange flatness simultaneously, the stereoscope's presence at the threshold of mimetic thickness and uncannily-flattened double vision interrogates “the notion that depth is truth” (West 235). Because the device “mimicked the third dimension,” it also called into question the “existence” of such a dimension, its contours, and even “surpass[ed] the effect of the real” (235). In toggling between image and reality,

illusion and perception, a device like the stereoscope ultimately dissolves the erected conceptual boundaries separating the two. It constructs instead a “hallucinatory realism” (243), drawing upon epistemological questions of perceptual limitation in mimesis.

As several scholars show in their work on fiction and photography throughout the period, the stereoscope retains an emphasis on *parts* over *wholes*:

stereoscopic vision is both disjunctive and disunified. One of the striking things about virtually all of Holmes’s and others’ descriptions of stereographs, is the obsessive emphasis on *parts* . . . . Holmes unwittingly verbalizes a fascination with the stereoscopic disruption of coherence, its inherent disorder in vision.

(West 244)

In her work on photography, Susan Sontag would agree with Holmes:

the familiar, rendered by a sensitive use of the camera, will . . . become mysterious. Photography’s commitment to realism does not limit photography to certain subjects, as more real than others, but rather illustrates the formalist understanding of what goes on in every work of art: reality is, in Viktor Shklovsky’s word, de-familiarized. (121)

The photograph compels viewers to see an object of reality in a way that is originally unfamiliar. It forces a vision that recognizes the uniqueness, and at times the strangeness, of the common. The artist, then, is not limited by what is already available as uncanny, as Freud dictates; rather, the artist produces through a particular vision of the common an uncanny aspect.

Dickens develops his aesthetic atmosphere in the opening paragraph and throughout the novel through repetition compulsion that builds to a psychological world of conflicting visions and, with character added, commingling consciousnesses. By combining a reference to

Marseilles with an animated world of “staring” entities, he conflates the real with the imaginative to suggest that they belong to the same vision. Dickens’s parataxis elicits an uncanny effect in part because it draws upon ambiguity, because it is repetitive without offering up much heuristic meaning, and significantly, because it is brimming with disembodied eyes. Freud mentions the superstition of the Evil Eye because it suggests future harm captured within and signified by a “look” (633). Otherwise, eyes signify phallic power and their removal invokes castration anxiety.

The eyes of Dickens’s narration, too, are ever-present and exert an effect without identifiable origin or meaning. The “staring” of his opening scene transplants human vision onto the landscape, constructing an inescapably confining social space. It feels paralyzing, slowing narrational temporality and forcing readers to work each “staring” detail into an image of totality to no avail. Dickens disaggregates his urban landscapes to such an extent that “the eye is moved from piece to piece, but the gaze is ultimately refused an overall meaning” (Wolfreys 204). This effect leads to a sense that setting undoes the laws of mimesis and that multiplicities of detail do not necessarily cohere. The uncanniness of Dickens’s landscapes do not come necessarily from a return of the repressed, or a generally gloomy atmosphere, as some understand the concept. Instead, Dickens illuminates the ambivalence of the term, enacting through fiction the problems in Freud’s recursive search for a definition.

A homologous moment of strange sight occurs just as William Dorrit has been freed from debtor’s prison. Following his release, William Dorrit attends a dinner party celebrating the Sparklers’ marriage, and he is kept from fully enjoying this celebration by the presence of the Chief Butler. The Chief Butler plays a minimal role in the novel’s plot; he appears every now and then, rather ominously, and his most significant line indicates the failure of Mr. Merdle’s ethics following his suicide. Otherwise, he watches, an activity that makes Dorrit uneasy:

Only one thing sat otherwise than auriferously, and at the same time lightly, on Mr Dorrit's mind. It was the Chief Butler. That stupendous character looked at him, in the course of his official looking at the dinners, in a manner that Mr Dorrit considered questionable. He looked at him, as he passed through the hall and up the staircase, going to dinner, with a glazed fixedness that Mr Dorrit did not like. Seated at table [*sic*] in the act of drinking, Mr Dorrit still saw him through his wine-glass, regarding him with a cold and ghostly eye. It misgave him that the Chief Butler must have known a Collegian, and must have seen him in the College—perhaps had been presented to him. He looked as closely at the Chief Butler as such a man could be looked at, and yet he did not recall that he had ever seen him elsewhere. Ultimately he was inclined to think that there was no reverence in the man, no sentiment in the great creature. But he was not relieved by that; for, let him think what he would, the Chief Butler had him in his supercilious eye, even when that eye was on the plate and other table-garniture; and he never let him out of it. To hint to him that this confinement in his eye was disagreeable, or to ask him what he meant, was an act too daring to venture upon; his severity with his employers and their visitors being terrific, and he never permitting himself to be approached with the slightest liberty. (*Little Dorrit* 678)

In part, this passage is comic. Dickens stages a scene with a figure who is well below Dorrit in rank, and whose sole responsibility is “official looking” with the purpose of facilitating the dinner party. Dorrit’s reading of the look as “questionable” humorously understates his perception, as the prolonged passage of his interpretation which follows attempts to diminish the anxiety enacted by the Chief Butler’s stare. However, his attempt is futile, as the Chief Butler’s

eye haunts Dorrit. In fact, it haunts several characters peripherally throughout the novel. His eyes are described like those of the eerie opening paragraph, maintaining a “glazed fixedness” perceived as hostile. The narration places frames like the wine glass between them, mediating their joint looks to further obscure their authority and meaning. Likewise, the shifting focalization figures Dorrit as both subject and object of the gaze simultaneously. As a result of these mutual starings and a free indirect style that disengages the stare from any singular authority, the reader is subtly worked into feeling the paranoia that Dorrit never shakes following his release from Marshalsea.

This stare is uncanny: it announces the familiar becoming strange and the ambivalence that such a transposition produces. The Chief Butler prompts Dorrit to consider the many versions of himself that could be accessed by his physical presence. “In front of the lens,” Roland Barthes writes of the particular view established by the photograph,

I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art . . . I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this . . . I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity . . . the Photograph (the one I *intend*) represents at that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death. (*Camera* 14)

Barthes speaks to the potentially multiplied and fragmented subjectivity produced at the moment the photographic eye falls upon its subject, or object. The intentionality of the Chief Butler’s stare, we find, is irrelevant to the meaning of this passage; his eye becomes frightening not because it is suspicious, though that connotation is well established, but because it punctures and

disintegrates Dorrit's sense of self. His staring reiterates to Dorrit that despite his newly-granted gentleman status, he cannot shake off his double, the formerly imprisoned and socially abject self which the Chief Butler's gaze reflects back at him. The doubling represents a splitting of the self, as "the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own" (Freud, "The Uncanny" 629). Dickens depicts how unreadable perceptions produce an uncanny sociality, wherein character can be read multiply through the ambivalence of the stare. The way that Dorrit reads the scene reveals how his consciousness partly belongs to the eyes of potentially malicious others.

Focalized partially through Dorrit, Dickens depicts the psychological processes that transform subject into object. Dorrit feels as though his interiority can be captured by his appearance; his external solidity reveals the mysteries of his interiority. And throughout the novel, there are many criminal and non-criminal types that are haunted by past events which others' looks conjure against their will. Our histories, for better or worse, are recoverable within the eye of another. Looking in this scene and throughout *Little Dorrit* transforms into a perpetual state of being looked at, as the lines between subject and object are destabilized. Dickens is no stranger to the troubling of this binary, and the realist novel generically straddles this same line between representational objectivity and subjectivity. Language and style displaces the fixedness of the image and open up large areas of psychological ambiguity. The above visually-entangled scene offers little hermeneutic understanding for the reader or for Dorrit. Seeing, in the case of Dorrit and the Chief Butler, engenders many possibilities for interpretation but ultimately leads to obscurity. The story—and the stare—won't tell.

While visual scenes often invite readers to take part, to see through the eyes of its characters and share a perspective, Dickens emphatically blocks the reader's participation. He

refuses the transmission of certain knowledge and instead uses sight in his novel to produce eerie epistemological tensions. This exchange in the novel registers a central problem Dickens considers in *Little Dorrit*. In a social world that encourages secrecy within familiar spaces, the social becomes a space of uncanniness rather than comfort, dangerously doubled, potentially illegible. Both domestic and economic structures are revealed to harbor transformative secrets in the novel, just as the Freudian uncanny references secrecy within familiar spaces.<sup>36</sup> Realism, in part, shows us that the self is relationally constituted alongside concrete social forms and abstractions.

Affery, as the figure both belonging to and excluded from domestic spaces, represents the ambivalence and darkness of familiarity best. She is a silent figure, abused verbally and physically by her employer and husband, who gains narrative power through her vision. Her sight is what first clues the reader into the important mystery of the book: Mr. Clennam's will, the reminder Do Not Forget, and the problem of Arthur's parentage. To offer the reader clues to the presence of and solution to the mystery, Dickens moves in and out of the real and the dream world. He establishes a continuity between Arthur as a quietly optimistic "dreamer" when he reflects on the history of Little Dorrit and Mrs. Flintwinch's dream that immediately follows Arthur's reveries: "When Mrs. Flintwinch dreamed, she usually dreamed, unlike the son of her old mistress, with her eyes shut. She had a curiously vivid dream that night . . . . In fact it was not at all like a dream; it was so very real in every respect" (*Little Dorrit* 81). Here, Dickens

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<sup>36</sup> In a recent essay, Ben Parker argues that the relationship between mystery and social criticism in Dickens's novels comes from a critique of this familial secrecy, and "of institutions and organizations that produce mystery and obscure knowledge" (134). He links this secrecy to the problem of "capitalist crisis" in Dickensian realism. The novels' protagonists come to their subjectivity as something which exists prior to their recognition of it, and part of the work of the novel is to discover "the truth of subjectivity" by "a detour through otherness" (132), but Parker argues that "capitalist crisis," presented as a system outside of subjectivity through Mr. Merdle's story, is shown to prevent this discovery in *Little Dorrit*.

insinuates that what we are reading probably exists as a plot point, but the dream offers him certain affordances for creating suspense and mystery within the domestic realm.

Unless Affery has some kind of unverified supernatural intuition, she sees her husband and his twin discussing an “iron box some two feet square” (83). Affery, paralyzed with fear, “had not the power to retreat to her room . . . but stood there staring” (83). Because she stares, her husband catches her out of her room and violently threatens her. Affery’s confusion about whether she dreams or sees is a defense against her husband. She wishes to have dreamt it, because seeing is an act of rebellion against Flintwinch’s wishes. The narration focalized through her perspective transforms her sight into a dream image, a hallucination that scares Affery but can be safely contained within the unreal. To the reader, however, Flintwinch’s severe reaction signifies that Affery’s sight is a danger to him, potentially exposing an illicit secret. Appeals to normality likewise situate the incident in the realm of the possible: “The sequence of things was so ordinary and natural, that, standing there, she could hear the door open, feel the night air, and see the stars outside” (83). Affery struggles between two visions in tension with one another: the dreamworld reveals an improbably doubled husband and the compounded, banal sensory experience within the dream makes it seem real. By calling Affery’s vision “staring,” Dickens aligns her action with the narration of the opening chapter, where reality is both invoked and obscured by shifting glimpses and fragmentary visions. Affery’s “staring” captures one image, the image of the doubled Flintwinches and the iron box, but it does not yet reveal any knowledge of what this event signifies. It is frozen and immobilized, captured in a snapshot, but yields more questions than answers. And unfortunately for Affery, there is no escaping the stare. It finds her, takes on agency of its own, and while she might attempt an escape through the dreamworld, she—and the reader—cannot return to complete ignorance.

The doubling of the Flintwinches further develops the uncanny aesthetic, and Dickens uses the doubling effect again with his great criminal figure, Rigaud/Blandois. While he slips between several identities in the novel, the narration identifies him first by a visual attribute: “his moustache went up under his nose, and his nose came down over his moustache” (169). His function in the plot is clear: he represents the sinister, criminal potential created within an unorganized, unaccountable, and predatory capitalist debt culture. “Society sells itself and sells me: and I sell Society” (818) he flippantly remarks, functioning as Dickens’s insurance that the reader understands the connection. The big political secret is that everybody is self-interested, and too-big-to-fail social and economic structures like the Circumlocution Office help institutionalize and preserve that reality. Rigaud has simply figured out the secret and takes less legitimate but equally effective avenues to secure his wealth. He indicates, as J. Hillis Miller argues, that “Society turns out to be a fraud . . . [and] is only a projection of the selfish desires of individuals; it is all too human. Society is fictive, a game of false appearances, and he who puts confidence in it is absorbed into its unreality” (“The Fiction” 226). Dickensian realism exposes the shadowy doubles created out of the most common social functioning, the secrets rippling beneath the reality we recognize.

The mysteries of parentage, inheritance, the empire’s monetary commitments, and human perception are the questions that haunt the narrative as well as questions that haunt the individual under the real systems of capitalism, technological advancement, and political posturing. In this way, the boundary between the worlds of unreality (dreamworld, hallucination, narrative fiction) and reality (capitalism, bureaucracy, the domestic, prison) collapse like the Clennam house. Through Rigaud’s caricature and Affery’s dream vision, the novel muddies the division of reality and fantasy, truth and fiction. Human sight, which exists at the threshold of interior perspective

and external arrangement, imagination and replication, empiricism and deception, provides a productive metaphor for Dickens to express and experiment with these non-observational realities.

Sight's fusion of reality and imagination reappears when Rigaud visits Mrs. Clennam to blackmail her. Within the scene, the great doublers of the novel—Affery, Rigaud, Mrs. Clennam, and Flintwinch—find themselves in a room together:

Mistress Affery, who stood at the table near [Rigaud], pouring out the tea, happened in her dreamy state to look at him as he said these words, and to fancy that she caught an expression in his eyes which attracted her own eyes so that she could not get them away. The effect of this fancy was to keep her staring at him with the tea-pot in her hand, not only to her own great uneasiness, but manifestly to his, too; and, through them both, to Mrs Clennam's and Mr Flintwinch's. Thus a few ghostly moments supervened, when they were all confusedly staring without knowing why. (*Little Dorrit* 404)

Compulsion, “dreamy state[s],” interpersonal looking, “staring,” and the suspension of knowledge—Dickens draws upon several of the motifs that have guided his sight experiments in the novel in this one short passage. Affery continues to blend looking with dreaming, pretending that her curiosity and desire to know through looking is the fault of Rigaud's, determined by “an expression in his eyes which attracted her own eyes.” Affery repudiates her own sight as though it only belongs to Rigaud or, in the earlier case, to some external force that compels her to walk into the scene of the doubled Flintwinches. The “uneasiness” of their shared sight is no deterrent; they are drawn to the action by an invisible force, a desire to know more by viewing more deeply, to press the action of the narrative into an image and study its surfaces, to find the detail

that explains the mystery of their being in this space together. This desire to look circulates throughout each of the characters without real origin; though the passage begins with Affery, her sight belongs to a compulsion that exists beyond her. The shared experience of “ghostly” staring does not produce meaning for these characters, but merely builds narrative tension and suspense, holding the reader at bay and postponing narrative revelation. It supersedes individual power and creates an air of mystery that troubles the lines of subject and object, turning persons into unreadable things. It reads as a hallucinatory, disembodied spectacle, closing off meaning even as the visual material continues to layer and intermingle. Indeed, the participants continue performing this action despite its equivocations “without knowing why.”

The stereoscope proves for the first time in the nineteenth century that any vision of reality is inherently doubled, and therefore vulnerable to perspectival insecurity. Dickensian realism uniquely relates to these hallucinatory doubled visions of the stereoscope, “produc[ing] a dream-like exaltation of the faculties, a kind of clairvoyance, in which we seem to leave the body behind us and sail away into one strange scene after another, like disembodied spirits” (Holmes, *The Stereoscope* 34). Descriptive, undiscerning detail does not necessarily create a positivist, mimetic reproduction. Rather, stereoscopic realism clutters the visual scene to invoke a “dream-like exaltation” more closely allied to imagination, wish, or the awareness of reality’s unending and untotalizable revelations. Dickens’s surplus of visual information, epitomized by the repetitive staring trope, creates narrative thickness while deepening the novel’s mysteries. The revelation of binocular disparity offers Dickens a way of representing invisible realities, a way of negating mimesis while portraying something recognizably real.

Though many accounts of realism perpetuate the notion that making the workings of the world visible builds objective knowledge, Dickens exploits the problems of perspective—its

relational dependence on differing perspectives to achieve a rounded totality—to show that reality cannot be represented in purely visual terms. Any vision of reality that seeks depth and understanding, as the binocular disparity of human sight proves, is doubled. Dickens provides his narrative with far too many eyes to emphasize this point, a surplus of visual information that refuses totalizing signification and closure. He builds a world that bears family resemblance to reality, or at least produces the “reality effect” (Barthes, “The Reality” 229), and infuses into that world a strong uncanny ambiance that reminds readers that what we know is only ever partial. The real has a shadow, an unconquerable absence at the heart of mimesis. And, as conflicting visions collide in perplexing and disconcerting ways throughout *Little Dorrit*, Dickens suggests that the uncanny is embedded into the fabric of the social, operating as a process of meaning-making and interpersonal reading, doubling and equivocating our sense of the potentialities of the real. It is a type of relationality to which, like his many characters, we are confined.

#### Realism’s Vanishing Points

According to John Romano, Dickens “resents” the limits realism poses to the creative writer. Realism can only ever achieve a vision of the world with “partial coherence but with great longing” (7). This partiality of representation and perception is metonymic,

the marking off, with imperfect closure, of a certain area of experience actually located on the world’s horizon. In his aspiration to ‘open’ or metonymic form, the realist intends that our experience of his novel will converge horizontally, as it were, with our experience of life. (68)

Romano inadvertently describes two of the operative metaphors my analysis has shown are crucial to understanding stereoscopic realism. One of these is the doubling effect. He insists that for Dickens to be understood as a writer of reality, his readers must “converge” with the

represented scene, mirroring the experience narrated with their own. Realism, then, produces doubles; it is the doubling of character and reader perception that solidifies the represented scene as realistic. Romano does not mention, however, that Dickens recognizes this necessity and plays with it by undermining the legitimacy of the double in the narrative. The Flintwinches, Rigaud/Blandois, Miss Wade/Tattycoram, and Pet and her deceased twin sister are all doubles that conjure an aesthetic of the uncanny tied to realist representation, suggesting that the social world is an uncanny space of ambiguity and fear.

Furthermore, in arguing for a delineated “horizon” of realistic experience, Romano unknowingly invokes a second narrative-visual metaphor: the vanishing point. Popular in linear perspective painting before its use in photography, the vanishing point describes a mathematical principle of parallel lines that appear to meet in the distance of a visual text, drawing the eye to a central point which adds coherence to the depiction overall. This principle was “used by artists to create a picture resembling reality, as if the eye mirrored the reality outside it” (Shires, *Perspectives* 6). Before art photographers began playing with form in their work, the vanishing point was present in most photographs without conscious intention:

Academic perspective is based on vanishing points situated on the horizon, which is always placed at eye level . . . As early as 1840, Arthur Parsey . . .

demonstrated that converging perpendiculars of the camera image were indeed mathematically correct and concluded: ‘Art has always represented objects geometrically, or as *they cannot be seen* in the *perpendicular* and visually, or as *they can be seen* in the *horizontal* direction.’ (Newhall 210, emphasis in original)

Beginning in the 1920s, photographers like Man Ray began tilting the camera to achieve visual effects that do not correspond to the vanishing point, which in turn released photography from

documentary realism. These new compositional forms resembled the Cubist and modernist artwork of the period. The vanishing point, then, is a technique of visual realism, using models of human eyesight to reproduce the processes by which humans view a scene.

Audrey Jaffe notices this prevailing idea in her book *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience*. Her thesis is that what appears to be an omniscient narration in many of Dickens's novels is in fact a fantasy of knowledge that reveals the limitations of certainty. She asks that we do not "naturalize omniscience," but instead notice how omniscient narration often betrays its own assumptions. "What we call omniscience can be located," she writes, "not in the presence or absence, but in the tension between the two—between a voice that implies presence and the lack of any character to attach it to, between a narratorial configuration that refuses character and the characters it requires to define itself" (4). In a Victorian world obsessed with objectification and classification—two early uses of the photograph as well—Jaffe shows that omniscience reveals both this desire and the anxieties of lack and mystery that surround it. She finds that Dickens was interested in this tension between knowledge and mystery, and he thinks about it through the idea of a shadowy double. In a letter to John Forster, Dickens says of his fiction, "I want to suppose a certain SHADOW, which may go into any place . . . a kind of semi-omniscient, omnipresent, intangible creature" (qtd. in Jaffe 419). Other critics point to the prevalence of shadows in *Little Dorrit* as well, which "are not simply patches of darkness but representations or simulacra . . . [that] serve time and again as images of replication, distortion, and opposition. Shadows reproduce originals with doubtful reliability" (Rosenberg 43).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See also J. Hillis Miller's *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* and Elaine Showalter's "Guilt, Authority, and Shadows of *Little Dorrit*."

There is plenty of evidence pointing to the prevalence of the shadowy double in Dickensian realism, but I want to suggest that Dickens had this painterly realist technique in mind when he writes, from Arthur's perspective, that Amy Dorrit represents this imaginary organizational placeholder: "Looking back upon his own poor story, she was its vanishing-point. Everything in its perspective led to her innocent figure" (*Little Dorrit* 801). Indeed, Amy occupies the center at which the web of connections within the novel converge. We "Do Not Forget" (406) that she is the surprise beneficiary of the will Arthur's mother tries to bury but loses to Rigaud, bringing him to the Clennam household.<sup>38</sup> She is the "little mother" (338) of Maggy and the underclass, the dutiful daughter of the Father of the Marshalsea, and the beloved and betrothed of the novel's timid protagonist. She travels between England, France, and Italy with the Gowans, which gives her some insight into the narratives of the Meagles and Tattycoram. Her passivity determines John Chivery's endlessly-revised tombstones, and her commitment to her family's imprisonment convinces Fanny to marry Mr. Sparkler and remove herself from the curse of the Dorrits as soon as she can. Amy is, in a structural sense, a central figure Dickens uses to tie up a few of the novel's loose ends. That the character best embodying bourgeois domesticity and submissive femininity is the novel's center is no coincidence, surely, and it is possible to read Amy as a redeeming moral figure counter to the mass capitalist corruption and imprisonment. After all, she relinquishes wealth for family, unlike any other character, and recognizes the imprisoning aspects of life outside of the Marshalsea. Dickens often includes these Angel in the House figures as a way of shoring up ideological, political, and

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<sup>38</sup> Hilary M. Schor speaks of Amy's role—and Dickens's daughters more generally—as one that "secure[s] collective memory" (she does not forget) and serves the final "distributive function associated with dying words" (129) in her handling of the wills. Schor uses the figure of the uncanny daughter, whose goodness also contains the seeds of her dark double in *Dickens and the Daughter of the House*. In the case of Amy, it can likewise be said that she becomes the purveyor of dead wishes through the wills—a ghost-like figure. Ultimately, Schor is interested in how *Little Dorrit* examines property, love, and self-authorship, concluding the daughter's position as a figure who "transmit[s]" inheritance, culture, and law opens a way to circumnavigate patrilineal possession (4).

sexual roles of the nuclear family. However, Amy's occupation of the "vanishing point" when read into the novel's concern with presence and absence in realist representation troubles that interpretation. We can read Amy with the same potential for the ghostly shadow that we read into the other characters. The "vanishing point" Amy represents in the novel is yet another realist trick, a mechanism by which Dickens replicates the conditions of visual realism without offering a totalizing, easily interpreted view.

*Little Dorrit* chronicles Dickens's thinking about the limitations of mimesis, particularly in its futile desire to reveal and show what cannot be made visible. He shows how absence and loss are inherent to the form. "All that photography's program of realism actually implies," Sontag might add, "is the belief that reality is hidden. And, being hidden, is something to be unveiled" (120-1). One cannot represent without delineating representational limits; representation is inherently bounded and hewed. If *Little Dorrit* makes its moral argument clear—as Ben Parker asserts, "for disclosure and a will-to-knowledge, against concealment, mystery, and deception" (137)—it is equally evident that Dickens expresses serious doubts toward any representation, written or visual, that claims to deliver its subject from mystery. This is the repressed truth of realist representation, the uncanny shadow of fictional reality. Parker, to the contrary, indicates that this "'repression' is an indicator of *full knowledge*—what is repressed is at the same time fully preserved" (138). Indeed, repression can be a kind of knowledge, and the symptom is its own evidence, but we must be careful not to slide knowledge underneath repression unproblematically, as though we have revealed truth in whole. *Little Dorrit* analyzes, through its uncanny aesthetic, how realism conceptually creates a vanishing point wherein narrative no longer clearly differentiates between knowledge and mystery, reality and illusion.

The dialectic of image and text throughout the nineteenth century heightens this sense of partiality. Examining Cruikshank's illustrations in *Sketches by Boz*, J. Hillis Miller points out that "both text and illustration stand side by side as imitations in different media of a third entity, some 'reality,' whether ideal, psychological, or material, which exists independently outside both and needs neither words nor pictures to continue in existence" ("The Fiction" 127). The "reality" that is represented by either version of the text can only be partial: "Illustrations in a work of fiction displace the sign-referent relationship assumed in a mimetic reading and replace it by a complex and problematic reference between two radically different kinds of signs, the linguistic and the graphic" (129). Similarly in studies of photographic realism, Jonathan Crary mentions that "in the nineteenth century, the relation between eye and optical apparatus becomes one of metonymy: both were now contiguous instruments on the same plane of operation, with varying capabilities and features" (129). In this way, optical instrument and observing eye become producers of a world of images, existing in "part-part relationships," with neither ever achieving whole vision. The eye, the camera, and the representations that either one might create are fragments of an outside "reality" (Miller, "The Fiction" 127), dependent on one another for meaning but not immune from signifiatory slippages. Perspective is shown to be purely relational; "[a]ll language is figurative, displaced. All language is beside itself. There is no 'true' sign for the thing" (124). The ghostly double, the shadow of what could be but cannot be known, is inescapable. The "open[ness]" (Romano 68) of metonymic form becomes potentially twinned with "the horror of the void" (Crary 125).

And yet, there is a drive to record and capture, to continue to reproduce the images and descriptions because they help us know, at the very least, what our "horizons" are. If the vanishing point is a navel where representation sinks, then we are compelled to produce,

imprisoned by the drive for more representations of reality that reveal the absences of others even as they create new vanishing points. As Flora, whose hurried dialogue never seems to get a fair treatment by critics, says to Arthur: “if seeing is believing not seeing is believing too and when you don’t see you may fully believe you’re not remembered” (Dickens, *Little Dorrit* 589). Though she attributes the quote to Mr. F, Flora reiterates one of the great concerns of representation both in this novel and in narrative and visual realism more generally. Flora reminds readers that sight is only a partial mechanism of understanding and knowledge, not the sole determinant. Just as importantly, we must attend to the areas outside the visible world, the invisible forces, the shadows we create through material existence. Flora reminds Arthur that sight is partial, metonymic, and that there exists more within a single scene than can be fully articulated by a single vision.

Flora’s desperation invokes another *raison d’être* of representation: the march against “time’s relentless melt” (Sontag 15), and the ability for sight to trigger memory and create ways of belonging. In her recent study of photography’s history, Kaja Silverman intervenes in the Barthesian argument concerning the absences of photography by noting how photographs “presence” (*The Miracle* 33). Silverman’s analysis recuperates photography by de-emphasizing Barthes’s “death” hypothesis (*Camera* 14) and instead examining how the medium is inherently relational, forging connection. Early photographers like William Henry Fox Talbot, for instance, use the language of receiving rather than taking images. Nature reveals herself through the photograph, thereby proving its ontology as a process of development, not a fixed replication. Sometimes that development shows what is not originally apparent, revealing the new and “hold[ing] open the perceptual ‘open’” (Silverman, *The Miracle* 11). Photography helps us “think analogically” about the self and our relations to the world. “It is able to disclose the world,

show us that it is structured by analogy, and help us assume our place within it because it, too, is analogical” (11). Silverman argues for an ethics of this ontology by repeating, “Two is the smallest unit of Being” (11, 88).

When Flora declares, “when you don’t see you may fully believe you aren’t remembered,” she reiterates this theory of ontologically and constitutively relational sight. Memory, in Silverman’s analysis, belongs to the “liquid intelligence” of the photograph, which she differentiates from the “optical intelligence” of humans (119). “Liquid intelligence” refers to the “unpredictable and uncontrollable” elements of early photography, and more literally, the wetness of the development process that enabled its variability. It is uncertain what will turn up in the photograph when contacting the various chemicals used; the “optical intelligence” of the human eye can provide a frame and perspective for the image, but those elements alone do not produce the final image. She relates “liquid intelligence” to “‘the archaism of water, of liquid chemicals,’ that connects photography to memory, the past, and ‘ancient production-processes’” (119). In a reading that hints at but does not cite Sigmund Freud’s claim about spirituality’s “oceanic feeling” (*Civilization* 11), Silverman notes, “Liquid intelligence is photographic, but it also courses through our psychic veins, and it is the great ocean in which we all swim” (*The Miracle* 119).

The metonymy and liquidity of representation provide analogues for our existence and also “challenge our belief in stable forms” (78). Realism promotes relationality and examines in complex ways the embeddedness of the self in the social, the necessity of others to know the self. Throughout the nineteenth century novel, and especially in Dickens’s social panoramas, “Two is the smallest unit of Being” (11, 88). Dickens is less optimistic about this relationality than Silverman, and finds it imprisoning at times: the Chief Butler’s judgmental look, Marseilles alive

and “glaring,” Affery’s paralysis. But in his other work on imprisonment—his 1842 visit to the Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia, narrated in *American Notes*, for instance—the most horrifying aspect of incarceration is its antisociality. The prison was meant to reform inmates quickly, but Dickens censures their method for achieving this effect: solitary confinement. “[T]he cells were so constructed that the prisoners could not hear each other, though the officers could hear them. Where is the nearest man—upon the right, or on the left? . . . How is he dressed? Has he been here long? Is he much worn away? Is he very white and spectre-like? Does *he* think of his neighbour too?” (*American Notes*, 141). We find the prisoner Dickens studies reflecting on the perception of prolonged time that incarceration creates—an internal perspectival shift dependent upon external, social structures—and “as he said these words . . . fell into a strange stare as if he had forgotten something” (135). He imagines the dreamworld of the prisoner, which includes memories of his family outside the prison walls, concluding that “it does not last long, now: for the world without, has come to be the vision, and this solitary life, the sad reality” (143).<sup>39</sup> Dickens converts the effects of asocial imprisonment narrated above into an inherent component of social life in *Little Dorrit*. The staring trope fixes moments of encounter, freezing the narrative’s temporality only to create greater ambiguity. Relationality is necessary for identity, but this identity is then vulnerable to another’s desire or whim. It is both the mechanism that grants interpersonal understanding and the slippery process that endlessly rejects epistemological closure.

If Dickens indeed “resents” the material and aesthetic limitations of his novel, as John Romano indicates, then the uncanny aesthetic helps his world seep out beyond the pages in

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<sup>39</sup> Similarly, “A Visit to Newgate” in *Sketches by Boz* employs the same dynamic between dream vision of freedom and the cold, unflinching reality of the cell: “Confused by his dreams, he starts from his uneasy bed in momentary uncertainty. It is but momentary. Every object in the narrow cell is too frightfully real to admit of doubt or mistake. He is the condemned felon again, guilty and despairing; and in two more hours will be dead” (214).

indeterminacy. He finds a way, anchoring these ideas in scenes of strange sight, to access invisible realities that language only approximates. Just as the doubled stereograph populates its images with objects to ward off “horror” (Crary 125), the realist novel accumulates description and detail to offer an illusion of representational thickness and ward off the limit, the “horizon.” Arthur’s revelation that Little Dorrit is the “vanishing point” where the narratives of the multiplot novel collide is an illusion of coherence that the novel undermines repeatedly. What about the final line, where our lovers “went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed” as “the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar” (*Little* 895), offers the reader a comfortable sense of narrative closure?

Dickens’s greatest illusion of narrative coherence was his decision to rename his novel *Little Dorrit* rather than *Nobody’s Fault*. With this change, he posits the diminutive and self-effacing figure as the novel’s center. Amy Dorrit is the “vanishing point,” where all the narratives of the multiplot novel converge. She binds the novel’s disruptive energies and tames them into domestic signification, perpetuating a certain bourgeois subjectivity put into relief by her gentle, maternal, anti-accumulative nature. This must be our answer to the novel’s enigmas, because Dickens is a great Victorian moralist, concerned in his narratives with a corrective, redeeming end, and that is what a marriage plot does. Right?

Or, perhaps the novel’s last minute name-change is not a transition, but instead, solidifies the connection between the two. Perhaps Amy Dorrit *is* Nobody. More than a figure representing the failure of accountability in his essay on the Crimean War, perhaps Nobody is also the “void” where meaning slips when the social system governing individual agency is shown to be a composite of fragments stitched together rather than a holistic form (Crary 125). Maybe the

“vanishing point” is the absence that subtends the realist presence of the novel, the accumulative detail and description ultimately adding up to lack, the circumlocutious excess that returns us to where we began. Perhaps our eye falls to Amy to solve the problems of totality, to make the partialities of the novel cohere. But that vanishing point is uncannily doubled, moving toward ambivalence, further obscuring truth as it attempts to capture it.

Chapter Four: *Daniel Deronda* and the Limits of Realism

... praying that I may not be too apt myself to prefer the haze to the clearness. But the fact is, I shrink from decided ‘deliverances’ on momentous subjects, from the dread of coming to swear by my own ‘deliverances’ and sinking into an insistent echo of myself.

—George Eliot, letter to Frederic Harrison, January 15, 1870

In her 1856 review of John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*, George Eliot conflates observation, sympathy, and realist form. Celebrating Ruskin’s theory of artistic merit, she writes: “The truth of infinite value that he teaches is *realism*—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality” (130). She echoes this sentiment a year later in a letter to her publisher, John Blackwood: “Art must be either real and concrete, or ideal and eclectic. Both are good and true in their way, but my stories are of the former kind. . . . The moral effect of the stories of course depends on my power of seeing truly and feeling justly” (362). Two years later, Eliot published her first novel, *Adam Bede*, containing a divergence from the plot to proselytize on the proper subjects of realism. Focusing on Romantic visions of the “common labourer” as a method of cultivating a “fibre of sympathy” (225), Eliot implores artists to dwell with the “vulgar” and observe the “deep pathos” and “sublime mysteries” discoverable in these underrepresented areas (229). It is the duty of the artist, her novel argues, to articulate in aesthetically pleasurable ways the lives of those previously invisible to literature. By 1871, Eliot’s deepening belief in the revelatory powers of observation takes a scientific form in *Middlemarch*, where optical metaphors systematize interpretation and analogize reality as an interconnected web perceivable only through the adoption of multiple viewpoints. In each of these cases, Eliot’s realism is grounded in the legible, visual existence of material relations. Though Eliot creates space for the subjective interpretations of the observer,

referring to metaphors of the warped mirror in *Adam Bede*, for example, she trusts the eye to deliver access to the real (221).

*Daniel Deronda* considers observational realism differently. In her last completed novel, Eliot leans upon the very “mists of feeling” she criticizes earlier as faulty and incomplete. She interrogates more suspiciously the relationship between vision, sympathy, and epistemology in deeply interpenetrative scenes of eye contact between key characters. In visual exchanges between Gwendolen and Daniel especially, *Daniel Deronda* deploys a chiasmic structure dependent upon interpretive reversals that reveal the instability of a purely observational epistemology. Gwendolen’s visual experiences move from the realm of narcissistic materiality—premised in her feminine physicality—toward an imaginative vision that glimpses at a transcendent, invisible beyond. In this plot’s reversal, Daniel’s too-diffusive poetic imagination makes desirable the pursuit of a material form, a discrete project through which he can marshal the chaotic libidinal energies of an imaginative vision. His solution paradoxically leaves the materially visible realm; it relies upon Daniel’s imagining from scratch the manifestation of a Jewish nation, and by the novel’s conclusion, readers have little idea what that, quite literally, looks like.<sup>40</sup> We are left in *Daniel Deronda*, then, with two unseen resolutions; by the novel’s end, we find ourselves mired in “mists.” As a writer initially devoted to art that traffics in “definite, substantial reality,” this indeterminacy hardly seems appropriate to her initial realist project.

Invoking a panoply of narrative forms, *Daniel Deronda*’s entangled plots, thematic reversals, and shifting aesthetic forms radically puncture realism’s claim to a totalizing vision of the actual. The novel summons and perverts realist conventions, suggesting Eliot’s later

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<sup>40</sup> It is perhaps too on-the-nose to remark on the wordplay here: Daniel’s diffusive “imagination” condenses in the singular project of an “imagined nation.”

suspicious regarding the observational aesthetic to which she initially attached her creative work. Of its two-pronged plot, the narrative that critiques realism's limitations is also the narrative that mimics it the closest. Gwendolen's marriage plot contains Eliot's most self-reflexive and metafictional questions concerning the problems of representing reality through observational modes.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to Daniel's romantic quest for a new nation, Gwendolen's plot presents both a commentary on the perverse voyeurism within modes of heightened observation and a critique of this desire as structured by the realist marriage plot. Similarly, her plot depicts how a purely observational realism works ideologically to deny women access to claims on the real. Conflating body and text, sensation and observation, Gwendolen's punishments and inadequacies do not didactically embrace Daniel's condemnation of her vanity or immorality. Rather, Eliot punishes Gwendolen to highlight the visual and narrative abuses enacted on realist heroines that Eliot, herself, is guilty of reinforcing in earlier works. The Gwendolen plot's lack of closure following Grandcourt's death and Daniel's marriage releases the heroine from realism's ideological stranglehold, though this release is an ambivalent, freighted, potentially tragic one. As this chapter's epigraph shows, the "deliverances" of the marriage plot for women in the realist novel risks complicity in the reproduction of the same patriarchal solutions to social problems. As a counter to these self-fulfilling, limiting closures, *Daniel Deronda* revels in the

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<sup>41</sup> In centering this chapter's analysis on Gwendolen's narrative, I do not intend to endorse F.R. Leavis's claim that Daniel's Zionist plot should have been excised from the novel. *The Great Tradition* and Leavis's literal excision which created a truncated *Gwendolen Harleth* enacts a patriarchal and Anglocentric violence to the intellectual work of a writer who asserted of her novel, "I meant everything in the book to be related to everything else there" (*GEL* 290). In my reading, Eliot expresses frustration with realism's ideologically restrictive limitations, and Daniel's narrative offers an alternatively romantic, imaginative paradigmatic shift doubling Gwendolen's narrative with a difference. It is not, however, structurally confined to realist convention in the ways that Gwendolen's narrative is and does not figure as centrally in my study of realism (and its discontents). Rather, I seek to show how even the plot that clearly reproduces realist conventions in this novel disturbs realism's claim on totality. The plots are not separable, as in Leavis's view; their doublings and reversals show they are commingled and co-constitutive.

“vague forms” Eliot once derided. She grounds this indeterminacy in strange and estranging visual relations that challenge the foundational aesthetic and narrative forms indexing “the real.”

### The Problem of a Beginning

Eliot professes in a self-authored epigraph commencing *Daniel Deronda*,

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars’ unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his . . . (3)

In problematizing the very notion of beginning-ness at the novel’s start, this epigraph performs at least two functions: it isolates particular methods of epistemological inquiry that are mapped onto gender, and it reveals the centrality of indeterminacy to the novel’s thematic, ethical, and formal ambitions. Eliot announces that the observational realism her previous novels imagined is insufficient here, as the veracity of perception is problematized by temporal organization. The epigraph narrows the conceptual gap between scientific, observational thinking—a masculine “strict measurer” originating knowledge in his own positivist “fix[ed] . . . point,”—and Poetry, an allegorical “grandmother” and middling figure who conceptualizes within the dual unfoldings of history and futurity, “backwards as well as forwards.” By calling grandmother Poetry simultaneously “less accurate” and akin to science, Eliot challenges the absence of acknowledged temporality in scientific reasoning’s observational position. This epistemological mode must “pretend” time is of no concern; rather than considering observable relationships through something comparable to Poetry’s doubled extensions into past and future, this

masculine science assumes its own truth outside of time. In an ironic reversal, the inferiority of humanistic endeavors like Poetry to theorize natural relationships is elevated to the status of a science when time and its relation to perception is thrown into the mix, and science falls from its own self-assured grace as it is shown to be another form of interpretation. Grandmother Poetry exposes what is overlooked in a singular, monolithic, assumedly objective stance. Emphasizing the presence of an observing subject caught in time for both methods of inquiry, Eliot claims, “No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.” The gendered essence of this epigraph forms a framework for what *Daniel Deronda* reveals to be true about the ideological constraints embedded within realist convention, a point that will be elaborated on later. Likewise, the dialectic established between the masculine, singular gaze of scientific positivism and the feminized multiplicities existent within literature replicates in miniature the novel’s chiasmic structure, conveyed in meetings between Daniel and Gwendolen.

Rather than presenting a legible, material world surveyed through visual contraction and dilation, as shown in the optical metaphors of *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda*’s opening epigraph underscores the problem of time in constructing reality. We might read Eliot’s gesture away from origin in this opening epigraph as a self-reflexive, meta-textual declaration of this novel’s difference, her attempt to sunder any oversimplified comparison with her mammoth of a literary predecessor. While *Middlemarch* grasps at metaphors of the web, stream, microscope, and light to mark interconnected relationships between part and whole, ultimately gesturing toward the “enterprise of totalization,” *Daniel Deronda* shies away from visual cues that are meant to clarify (Miller, “Optic” 169). If Eliot means to construct an “ideal observer” (136) in *Middlemarch* that can toggle between various distinct views to retrieve a vision of the whole, *Daniel Deronda*

interrogates the likelihood of such an “ideal observer” actually existing, especially considering limitations of time, space, and agency. In empirical science, a temporal narrative puts order to perceived events. One must “make-believe . . . a beginning” to commence epistemological inquiry, yet this origination Eliot declares arbitrary, and more problematically, taken for granted as an essential origin point rather than a chosen one. The novel’s beginning negates the truth of its own beginning-ness, declaring immediately that the point of origin is not essentially an origin, which would accommodate a kind of holistic, totalizing narrative with a neat beginning and resolute end. Alex Woloch writes of *Deronda*’s divergence from its looming realist parentage that Eliot “moves beyond any simple, or settled, architecture of parallelism to suggest a dizzying, even hallucinogenic network of connections that could, ironically, serve to dislocate and confuse the reader” (“*Daniel*” 169). This novel, as we come to discover repeatedly through thematic tropes like shocking family revelations and supernatural murderous foreshadowing, problematizes absolute claims on time, origin, relationality, and perception.

This epigraph frames the notably strange first paragraph of the novel, where the reader plunges into an anonymized interiority mimicking the authority of omniscient narration. Eliot abstracts visual experience to its base elements, stripping away identifying description, to emphasize the complicated interactions of eye and mind:

Was she beautiful or not beautiful? and what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents? (3)

This narration exposes a co-conspiratorial voyeurism that attends novel-reading; we are “coerc[ively]” drawn into objectifying this unknown woman in a suspended moment of psychological intimacy with an observing figure. Seeking to understand this vision’s discomfiting effect on the viewer’s consciousness by reducing her to a visible existence, her “form or expression,” the intrigued eye moves from superficialities to epistemological quandary. The observer’s inability to discern how this woman fits into the scene refracts through her “beams,” which do not betray her interiority. He desires to put her “glance” in a legible universe of his own authoring, but her eye resists; asking whether “the good or evil genius domina[tes]” attempts closure where the eye emphasizes the “dynamic.”

Eliot foregrounds this masculinist attempt to seek answers that close off, and therefore objectify and master, this woman’s outward form. In the viewer’s circular logic, because she appears enigmatic, he is troubled by his inability to know, which therefore makes *her* “dynamic quality” the problem and not his desire for mastery. The final question posed— “Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?”—dramatically suggests this individual feels trapped by an unrelenting, consuming force emanating from her. There is a sense in the question that one *should* feel a “longing in which the whole being consents” —that this desire would make the effect of the woman’s look signify cogently. If only he understood his own desire to look at her, and if only she communicated clearly a legible feminine desire to meet his eye, then the tensions within this question might be resolved. But Eliot keeps this visual experience ambiguous.

This illegibility is multiplied by the environment, the gambling table, where “the atmosphere was well-brewed to a visible haze” that feels “all correspondingly heavy” (3). Within this tableau, multiple layers of visual exchange intensify the claustrophobic, troubling

spectatorship within the room: from a child's "blank gaze" to "new comers being mere spectators" to the gambling libertine man "who looked at life through one eyeglass" (4-5), the scene is heavy-handedly suffused with eyes. As the man, who we come to know as Daniel, continues to stare at the woman, who we come to know as Gwendolen, "[t]he inward debate which she raised in Deronda gave to his eyes a growing expression of scrutiny, tending farther and farther away from the glow of mingled undefined sensibilities forming admiration" (5). Her mere existence "gave" to his mind, as though by force, the psychological tensions justifying his contempt and judgment: his evil eye. "Was she beautiful or not beautiful?" pins the problem of legibility to the woman's bodily materiality, magnified by a voyeuristic environment that authorizes his visual activity. The great effect of this first paragraph is its unsettling reversal of authority. Rather than comfortably settling into this masterful gaze inflicted on womanly form, the visual interaction folds back onto the reader, so that we desire an answer to the mysteries of the woman also. We become complicit in her objectification for the sake of epistemological mastery.

In both the epigraph and the first paragraph, Eliot engages in surprising reversals that have been long discussed in criticism, particularly in regard to the problem of origin—a problem of knowledge, represented through Gwendolen's body in this case, but persisting in other plots. Cynthia Chase argues that the novel undermines clear positions on issues of causality, origin, and referentiality. When Hans Meyrick writes in his bizarre letter of "the present causes of past effects" (*DD* 549), he reverses a typical realist narrative of linearity, where events and revelations unfold in temporal succession. The letter instead

offers a deconstruction of the narrator's story and, by implication, of story in general—both of history, with its system of assumptions about teleological and

representational structures, and of discourse, with its intrinsic need to constitute meaning through sequence and reference. (Chase 216)

The novel's plot arc, Chase argues, can be read both forwards and backwards (like Grandmother Poetry), using realist and deconstructive methods, because both "constitute a single discontinuous process that moves away from personification, abandoning the notion of the subject for the notion of linguistic operation, reconstruing the narrative's starting point as a text rather than as a subject" (225). *Daniel Deronda* becomes more of a writerly text in her analysis—a novel specifically about language and its fictionality, its "decomposition," its attenuated materiality.

For all of his purported sympathy, Daniel battles a desire to look and objectify the female form in front of him. He intellectualizes his own discomfort with a mastering eye by displacing it onto Gwendolen, as though *she* unfairly victimizes *him*. The tension between the masculinized "strict measurer" who must "make-believe . . . a beginning" is revealed here to be a specifically gendered form of power. Daniel's faith in his ability to read Gwendolen's surface implies a denial of her interiority—she can be read at a superficial level—at the same time that her illegibility suggests the existence of an invisible reality invoked through that unrecognizable form. Eliot challenges the centrality of his viewpoint through Gwendolen's indeterminacy, the "dynamic quality" of her own vision, reversing the power differential to place Daniel in a spectating state of "coercion." In this way, we begin to experience as readers, alongside Daniel, the injuries of objectification that Gwendolen is victimized by and that inform her own perceptual development and subjectivity.

Though the novel plunges into Daniel's interiority immediately, it quickly crosses to Gwendolen's reception of this vision. Gwendolen's "form" for Daniel signifies a mystery to be solved by his own scrutiny, but Gwendolen experiences this interaction with more material pain:

in the course of that survey her eyes met Deronda's, and instead of averting them as she would have desired to do, she was unpleasantly conscious that they were arrested—how long? The darting sense that he was measuring her and looking down on her as an inferior, that he was of a different quality from the human dross around her, that he felt himself in a region outside and above her, and was examining her as a specimen of a lower order, roused a tingling resentment which stretched the moment with conflict. It did not bring the blood to her cheeks, but sent it away from her lips . . . Deronda's gaze seemed to have acted as an evil eye.

(5-6)

Gwendolen the viewer would "desire" to lower her eyes and deny Daniel a sense that his gaze matters, but a separate force works—like Daniel's feeling of "coercion"—to make her eyes linger on his. Gwendolen feels uncertain "how long" they have been locked in this domineering co-gazing, as the narrative slows to conscript the reader in this prolonged act of joint spectatorship. Once the frozen, "arrested" quality of their gazes is established, Eliot reveals the difference of effects this engagement has on Gwendolen. While Daniel's challenging questions stem from a sense that he typically has mastery over the objects in his vision, and Gwendolen disrupts that surety, Gwendolen interprets this gaze as an evaluative one from the outside.<sup>42</sup> She presupposes no agency over the spectatorial act, as Daniel does; her first impulse is to "avert" what shames her.

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<sup>42</sup> This effect is similar to Elizabeth's initial interpretations of Mr. Darcy's gaze, discussed in chapter one.

Her interpretation of the event is filtered through the material realities of instability. Her particular economic instability is revealed by the gambling that opens the novel, the letter she receives from her mother shortly after, and the small sliver of a tumultuous family history the narrative reveals. And of course, the generalized instability of being a woman in a nineteenth-century marriage plot is no shock; Gwendolen has been socialized to value the mobility attached to a voyeuristic eye when it evaluates her positively, and her own desires have been structured by this male-authored system of patrilineage and the marriage market. Daniel's "evil" gaze, then, is perceived as injurious. Prickly, wincing descriptors of her "darting" and "tingling" impressions of inferiority reiterate the power of this mastering gaze. This feeling intensifies to "a pressure which begins to be torturing" (6).

The interplay of the novel's first epigraph and opening paragraph points to a complicated, entangled, and ultimately irresolute problem of origin, relationality, and assumed mastery that Eliot unravels. The immediate intensity of the visual in its various forms—spectacle, voyeurism, surveillance—crystallizes the fraught and destabilizing dynamics of sight and interpretation that are extended throughout the novel. "Was she beautiful or not beautiful?" is a focal question of the marriage plot, and therefore, a focal question in the development of realist form. In Eliot's unsettlingly intimate peek into the subjectivity of the male viewer, our piqued desire reveals our own readings to be as ethically fraught, voyeuristic, and invasive. The problem of Eliot's beginning is that it is not a true beginning; rather, this opening epigraph and paragraph asks us, in the abstract, to extend our thinking backward to call upon realist conventions we have grown accustomed to and consider how perverse they become when stripped to their bare abstractions. Suspended in this unnerving act of voyeurism, Eliot draws attention to how the realist novel pins its ideological and epistemological projects to the woman's body.

### Woman as Text

Throughout *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen is watched. She is watched by Daniel and fellow gamblers at the roulette table; Daniel watches again when she pawns her necklace after learning of her family's misfortunes; Grandcourt surveils her at social events and polices her conversations; Lydia Glasher notes her movements as she makes her decision about Grandcourt's proposal; and of course, we learn early in the novel that Gwendolen watches herself frequently. As Peter Brooks notes, "Gwendolen's novel is resolutely, insistently visual, a conspiracy of looking, spying, mirroring, exploring fully the visual logic of the realist tradition, most especially where the focus of looking is the young woman up for barter on the marriage market" (*Realist* 105-6). Insofar as this character "sums up a certain English novelistic tradition" (106), Eliot subverts this tradition by departing from the typicality of the marriage plot, extending Gwendolen's story past her marriage and into her widowhood, and ending her plot without a clear sense of resolution. Eliot asks through a typically realist character striving toward atypicality, what do we do with the hypervisible femininity created by these literary forms? What are the possibilities for a subjectivity built only to perform and naturalize damaging ideologies? Eliot investigates through Gwendolen's plot, bearing the burden of totalizing representation and knowledge-seeking, fiction's complicity in an ideologically perverse social structure.

Eliot explicitly ties the physical act of sight to Gwendolen's subjectivity, emphasized particularly as she checks her visage in any mirror she passes. Pronouncements of Gwendolen's amplified narcissism abound, and she even "kisse[s] the cold glass which had looked so warm" (13). The mirror becomes a touchstone symbol for Gwendolen's diminishing solipsism, until she eventually finds herself "sank before the bewildering vision of these wide-stretching purposes in which she felt herself reduced to a mere speck . . . dislodged from her supremacy in her own world" (689). In Jean Sudrann's pessimistic reading of the novel's obsession with aliens and

exiles, ultimately concluding in lonely existential angst, Gwendolen's plot constitutes "the story of the annihilation of the self" (442).

Though my interpretation of this narrative trajectory allows room for more optimism, to be discussed later, the "annihilation" Sudrann points to has much to do with hypervisibility's vicious cycle of desire and violence. On the other side of Gwendolen's high self-regard, determined by an external male eye, lies heightened "mortification" when that viewer criticizes her (*DD* 14). For instance, when Daniel returns the necklace Gwendolen believed she has surreptitiously pawned, Gwendolen experiences "wounded pride," believing he "had dared to place her in a thoroughly hateful position" and "was entangling her in helpless humiliation" (14). This critical eye even develops powers that transcend material reality, as Gwendolen later laments, "You don't know how much I am afraid of Mr Deronda. . . . Because when he came to look on at the roulette-table, I began to lose. He cast an evil eye on my play" (350). The injuries of hypervisibility revolve around Gwendolen's universe only, and Eliot makes it clear that the men in the novel remain mostly oblivious to its effects. Sir Hugo says of Daniel's "evil eye," "I don't think ladies generally object to have his eyes upon them." Caught between desiring the (mostly artificial) power that comes with attracting the male gaze and feeling its domineering entrapments, Gwendolen retorts simply, "I object to any eyes that are critical" (351).

Gwendolen's attachment to visibility is an ambivalent one. Part of the reason Eliot painstakingly describes the multiplicity of spectators that surround Gwendolen at the gambling table and elsewhere is to show how her image-centric subjectivity is cultivated and reinforced socially. Any interpretation of her narcissism or solipsism must also account for her environment, represented through visual excess. Because so much of Gwendolen's subjectivity is defined from the outside, it comes as no surprise that she looks to her own outsides to discern the

real. When she receives her mother's letter detailing their new economic loss, a revelation that throws Gwendolen's social identity temporarily into flux, she looks to the mirror. Though she "might have looked lingeringly at herself for pleasure," as several other characters do without serious punishment, "now she took no conscious note of her reflected beauty, and simply stared right before her as if she had been jarred by a hateful sound and was waiting for any sign of its cause" (11). The empty searching in Gwendolen's meeting with the mirror is an attempt to glean "any sign" of how to respond to this reality. Because she perceives her subjectivity from the outside, the mirror signifies more than feminine narcissism. As John Berger compellingly claims in *Ways of Seeing*,

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.

The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight. (51)

Constantly perceiving herself from the outside, and imagining her life as a theatrical "drama" (DD 6), Gwendolen's desire to be beautiful is not as much a mark of her vanity, as many have asserted, but because she recognizes the role that her external appearance plays in socioeconomic opportunity. There is, in fact, little textual evidence that supports a reading of Gwendolen caring about beauty for its own sake. She even turns down sleep to pack her belongings for Offendene with the consolation that "a slight trace of fatigue about the eyes only made her look the more interesting" (12). Concerned about the extent to which beauty can be leveraged as social capital in her hypervisual world, she implicitly understands that appearance is her greatest asset.

Moreover, Gwendolen's ideal is not merely to be beautiful, but to be *exceptional*—to differ from other “middling” characters, to be notably singular.

Considering this motivation meta-textually, Gwendolen wants to be narratable. From the enigmatic opening paragraph that necessitates evaluation of Gwendolen's unknown and nebulously articulated “form,” to Gwendolen's own conceiving of her identity as a “heroine” (30) and a “princess in exile” (32), Eliot uses the language of narrative representation to describe Gwendolen's self-understanding. Identity, meaning, and knowledge are attached explicitly to literary language: “what remained of all things knowable, she was conscious of being sufficiently acquainted with through novels, plays, and poems” (31). Gwendolen matches her desires to narrative modes of thinking: “Her ideal was to be daring in speech and reckless in braving dangers . . . and though her practice fell far behind her ideal, this shortcoming seemed to be due to the pettiness of circumstances, the narrow theatre which life offers to a girl of twenty” (51). Because a realist marriage plot in Gwendolen's view limits possibilities, squashes the “ideal,” and requires that aspiration adjust to social limitation, Gwendolen aims to be a heroine differentiated from the Juliet Fenns of her world. Rather than “a girl as middling as mid-day market in everything but her archery and plainness” (94), Gwendolen strives to be an exceptional figure, a heroine of romances rather than of realism.

The treatment of Gwendolen as a hypervisible feminine figure desperate to be perceived as different makes visible the aesthetic labor of constructing character. Under the auspices of representing the “middling,” realist writers work hard to make uniquely singular their protagonists against a homogeneous background of verisimilitude. Gwendolen's struggle for exceptionality is the writer's struggle also. The realist novel relies upon an interplay of flattening and deepening within the “character-system,” so that particular figures seem particular only

because they are granted complexity, roundedness, *in relation to* the flattening effect impressed upon secondary characters (Woloch, *The One* 24). In this way, then, we find that Gwendolen is entirely typical of the realist heroine, despite her best efforts. Eliot reiterates this fact by entrapping her within the marriage plot she desperately wants to escape.

If difference constructs character, then the problem of also creating a background from which the differentiated character breaks through is significant. There must be an agreed-upon externality from which the realist figure emerges as unique. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues that realism functions through the construction of a temporally and spatially consistent faith in the objective existence of an “out there.” That real externality is delivered through singular subjectivities we inhabit in narration that crystallize into spatial and temporal wholes. This process involves a “certain circularity” often subtly interwoven into narrative, so that interior processes and external environments participate in a mutually constitutive pact, producing what she calls consensus:

the realistic consensus produces and supports the existence of an objective world; consensus literally "objectifies" the world. . . . What is so, is so, because many different viewpoints *agree* that it is so. A stable, invariant world is there (at least to human perception)—solid, as in itself it really is—*because* everybody agrees that it is so. (*Realism* 77, emphasis in original).

Gwendolen’s desire to differ from this referential background Eliot constructs is a futile effort, though, because her material existence is determined by a structure of social power and authority that limits possibility. The fiction Gwendolen reads can exist outside of that structure because it is imaginative; Gwendolen’s consciousness, though, is bound to its materiality. She can only be a realist heroine in the world agreed upon through consensus. At times, Gwendolen’s body blends

with language in undifferentiated ways; when playing archery, Gwendolen is described as exhibiting “pretty archness” (88), an explicit conflation of body and text. Gwendolen’s desire for differentiation from the “middling” is met with desires that are precisely “middling”—the recognition that she must marry someday, that her social rank is precarious and demands economic stability, and that opportunity depends upon a particular kind of beauty. In these ways, she is typical.

Yet, there are plenty of non-realist descriptors to counter her middlingness. She’s described as a serpentine Lamia figure: “The remark that Gwendolen wound her neck about more than usual this evening was true” (8). These glimpses of uncannily slithering through public space, though, often fall back into realism quickly: “it was not that she might carry out the serpent idea more completely: it was that she watched for any chance of seeing Deronda, so that she might still inquire about this stranger, under whose measuring gaze she was still wincing.” Eliot bandies between unrealistic descriptors of Gwendolen with entirely reasonable explanations for those descriptions. While Gwendolen “like[s] to differ from everybody,” as she tells Rex, and to “do what is unlikely” (37), the narration repeatedly reveals her to be “held captive by the ordinary wirework of social forms” so that she “does nothing particular” (43).

This “wirework” manifests as a domineering, invasive patriarchal authority masquerading as the search for knowledge. In her feminist psychoanalyt reading of the novel, Jacqueline Rose finds that Gwendolen’s excessive physicality paired with sensational affect legitimizes masculine power in the novel:

The scrutiny of the woman and her guilt . . . clearly bears the weight of another question. ‘To kill and not kill’ evokes another predicament, that of knowing and not knowing, that is, the predicament of a knowledge which can never be

complete . . . . Guilty or not guilty, the question of the woman's sexuality transposes the problem of the limits of knowledge into the form of a judgment. . . . desire itself now stands for a conflict of affect and knowledge which no moral judgment can resolve. (109)

While Freud's case studies often consider the concrete problem of a woman's sexuality to represent more abstract issues of epistemology (as in Dora's hysteria), Rose argues that Eliot reverses this by beginning with the problem of knowledge and impressing that epistemological dilemma onto the "drama of a woman's sexual crime" (108-9). Using both Gwendolen and Madame Laure in *Middlemarch* as examples, Rose shows how "[t]he woman stands . . . for a corruption of the visible and a degradation of the scientific pursuit of truth" (110). Later, though, she claims that this "wild" female sexuality remains unreadable or outside of scientific verifiability, which strengthens its necessity. These representations create a condition where the "controlling knowledge of science" (110) is called upon as necessity.<sup>43</sup>

This masculinized mastery of the illegible woman rehearses the same tensions analyzed earlier in the novel's opening epigraph and its first paragraph. Science—male, fixed, and "certain" of his perception and its relation to truth—is thrown into confusion by the invisible, temporal macro-scale of "grandmother Poetry." In this way, the empirical epistemologies represented by a personified science overlaps with the scientific eye used by Lydgate and Daniel in their dissections of theatricalized female form. The masculine impulse to master the tensions instigated by the woman is revealed to be a fiction ideologically concealing and naturalizing the

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<sup>43</sup> As a significant historical context for this reading, Rose cites the Contagious Diseases Act of 1860, which legally inscribed the woman's body as a discursive site for morality. The target of this law, female prostitutes, were believed to be visibly identifiable and vulnerable to criminal law. Such a law introduced into common discourse "a panic about the meaning of the woman" (Rose 116).

subjectivity of the observer. The will to know when confronted with the mystery of woman as spectacle is a fantasy of power, and Rose holds Eliot accountable for upholding this framework:

the image of a woman subjected to a panic-stricken and ceaseless scrutiny . . . .  
 reveals so-called historical discourse to be implicated in a fantasy at the heart of  
 literary form, and literature itself to be caught up in the most pernicious of social  
 images and codes . . . . If George Eliot's last novel can only resolve that felt crisis  
 by a journey off the edge of English culture (Deronda's quest), she is not alone in  
 looking back to the woman and asking her to make good that other social  
 degeneration through a renewal of the moral self. (119)

Gwendolen's conclusion can be read as disappointingly tragic, another conventional man-teaches-the-bad-woman-a-lesson story. But Rose's concern with teleology in the form of Gwendolen's ending, promising goodness as determined by Daniel, is not the radical overthrow of patriarchal visual structures a feminist reading would wish for, and Rose takes Eliot to task for this ending.

However, there is room for optimism in the irresoluteness and indeterminacy of Gwendolen's ending. Though Rose compellingly argues that Gwendolen's ethical awakening reinscribes male authority and female submission at the conclusion, it is also true that Gwendolen escapes subjecting herself to the same vicious forms of feminine visibility and surveillance in a marriage to Daniel, which the narrative promotes and gestures to as a neat resolution following Grandcourt's death. As Gwendolen's materiality attenuates and her voice becomes more disembodied at the novel's conclusion, Eliot takes the pressures that have orchestrated her experience of reality and subjectivity off of Gwendolen, leaving her to imagine what other outcomes may exist apart from conventionalities.

Even the middle of Gwendolen's plot complicates Rose's strong critique. The ambiguity and sensationalism of the Gwendolen/Grandcourt courtship and marriage both holds open interpretative space and invokes sensational rhetoric to highlight the diverse forms of violence enacted on Gwendolen through established social forms. Rather than merely replicating problematic tropes of visual scrutiny, attached to the psychoanalytic problem of the woman-as-signification, Eliot lingers uncomfortably within those tropes. Drawing out the discomfort of the gaze and its relationship to interpretation and knowledge emphasizes the unethical incorporation of the other within realist conventions. While I agree that the Daniel plot provides an alternative to this "felt crisis," Eliot does not gladly leave her heroine in its throes. Instead, Eliot points repeatedly to Gwendolen's desire for alternative plotting and realism's inadequacies to accomplish that plot.

This tension can be found in one of her early interactions with Grandcourt. In their flirtatious period pre-marriage, Gwendolen strives to hold open space for possibility and ambiguity beyond a traditional marriage plot. Grandcourt begins,

"The gain of knowing you makes me feel the time I lost in uncertainty. Do *you* like uncertainty?"

"I think I do, rather," said Gwendolen, suddenly beaming on him with a playful smile. "There is more in it."

Grandcourt met her laughing eyes with a slow, steady look right into them, which seemed like vision in the abstract, and said, "Do you mean more torment for me?" (124)

Grandcourt's arrogant faith in his "knowing" Gwendolen, positioned here in distinction to a period of "uncertainty," follows the colonizing logic he exhibits throughout the novel.

Gwendolen's consciousness has already been claimed by him, as he assumes her desires and commits to how she can bolster his sense of self. Gwendolen resists, coquettishly, the implication that he knows her fully; her "playful[ness]" suggests that the mystery (of sexuality) can be revealed, but is momentarily withheld to heighten their libidinal energy. Gwendolen "suddenly" recognizes the potential to insert this mystery into the conversation, to keep their play of language open. The "more" that this openness maintains is a creative space that exceeds easy plotting.

Grandcourt rebuts with an unflinching, fixed gaze that dominates, shirks the flirtatious quality of the scene, and aligns Gwendolen's openness to alternative plottings to "torment." Significantly, this rebuttal is framed as "vision in the abstract." The same imperative operates in this visual exchange as in the opening paragraph, where Gwendolen's physical, material "form" necessitates the vocational call to judge and categorize, to construct a limitable interpretation that can be impressed upon her material existence. The moment where "vision in the abstract" is invoked is a moment of ambiguity that rejects and necessitates mastery simultaneously; the male vision centered in these scenes is "torment[ed]" when withheld from simplified, visible verifications of their seemingly objective, material, scientific, or colonizing assumptions.

Additionally, Grandcourt's "fixed" and authoritative position is not held to the linguistic and representational dissection that the woman's position is. After a vague physical description of his "handsome" visage, the narration declares,

Attempts at description are stupid: who can all at once describe a human being? even when he is presented to us we only begin that knowledge of his appearance which must be completed by innumerable impressions under differing circumstances. We recognize the alphabet; we are not sure of the language. (91)

Contrary to the incredible effort men make to pin down Gwendolen through visual cues, this narration rejects the notion that character can be known in full when describing the novel's most masculine character. An interpretation based on visual first impressions will inevitably prove incomplete or reductive, and Eliot only accepts a totality that represents "innumerable impressions"—that is, too many to be sufficiently counted or accounted for. In the complex interplay of persons and environments, there is an infinite array of permutations. In part, the narration releases Grandcourt from the tyranny of being fully known, allowing him a subjectivity that realist vision does not grant as readily to women. But Eliot also complicates the relationship between form ("alphabet") and meaning ("language"), ironically undermining the masculine attempt in this novel to define Gwendolen as any singular thing.<sup>44</sup>

Recognizing the extent to which "we are not sure" of another's reality remains a central point of Eliot's ethical investigation in the novel—rather than promoting the possibility of totalizing omniscience through visual cues, Eliot explores the virtues of the epistemological limit. Gwendolen's desire for the unknown in her exchange with Grandcourt is a way of holding open possibility beyond a marriage plot closure. Later, "[h]aving come close to accepting Grandcourt," the narration indicates that "Gwendolen felt this lot of unhopd-for fullness rounding itself too definitely: when we take to wishing a great deal for ourselves, whatever we get soon turns into mere limitation and exclusion" (123). Gwendolen's desire to be a narratable

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<sup>44</sup> In "Does Grandcourt Exist? Description and Fictional Characters," David Coombs considers parallels between this notion of description and contemporaneous debates about the "logic of feelings and the logic of signs" (391), first theorized by John Grote and later picked up by George Henry Lewes. These philosophies differ along two key vectors. The logic of feelings is "sensory/pictorial," more visual and developing through "acquaintance" with a thing, object, or idea; the logic of signs relies only on representations that are verbal and linguistic. In this way, too, one logic depends more on presence and the other on absence. For Lewes, these logics were compatible in knowledge acquisition because the logic of feelings congeal through perception into a representational sign. "Put another way, description, as we now understand it, blurs the distinction between presentations and representations" (393).

figure, singular and apart from realist homogeneity, ironically leads to her inscription into the realist plot from which she sought creative escape.

Recognizing the marriage plot as closure—read by Gwendolen as the death of the heroine—Eliot’s narrator asks the reader to desire a less certain future for Gwendolen. We, too, hold open space for a new ideal; we are drawn into believing that Gwendolen represents “a soul burning with a sense of what the universe is not” who becomes quickly “held captive by the ordinary wirework of social forms and does nothing particular” (43). Again, Eliot reveals that it is difference from what is average—the “particular”—that marks the emergence of realist character; and yet, this difference is lost when placed in prevailing forms of emplotment that reproduce limited, smothering versions of femininity. Gwendolen’s particularity can only be sustained if she escapes the marriage plot. Her attempts at music and gambling represent two pathways Gwendolen attempts to avert a predictable ending, and she fails to earn her independence through both. Though she yearns for a life without limit, Eliot shows how this meta-textual, self-reflexively realist heroine is tragically predetermined.

As Gwendolen’s readable form is made to bear the burden of realist consensus, omniscience, and the failure of both to totalize character, the narration becomes increasingly sensationalized. These realist pressures eventually buckle as Eliot transitions to a sensational form more explicitly and violently indicating realism’s ideological entrapments.

#### Sensational Slippages

Gwendolen’s decision to marry Grandcourt does not come easily to her. As her mother reminds her of the necessity of verbal response—“[t]he man waits,” she chillingly warns her daughter—Gwendolen’s ambivalence about the power associated with this decision is apparent. In a “startled” and agitated state, Gwendolen ponders:

Yet—was it triumph she felt most or terror? Impossible for Gwendolen not to feel some triumph in a tribute to her power at a time when she was first tasting the bitterness of insignificance: again she seemed to be getting a sort of empire over her own life. But how to use it? Here came the terror. Quick, quick, like pictures in a book beaten open with a sense of hurry, came back vividly, yet in fragments, all that she had gone through in relation to Grandcourt—the allurements, the vacillations, the resolve to accede, the final repulsion; the incisive face of that dark-eyed lady with the lovely boy; her own pledge (was it a pledge not to marry him?)—the new disbelief in the worth of men and things for which that scene of disclosure had become a symbol. That unalterable experience made a vision at which in the first agitated moment, before tempering reflections could suggest themselves, her native terror shrank. (247)

When measured against a choiceless poverty, as her family's wealth dwindles to dire levels, Gwendolen admits to some self-worth gleaned from Grandcourt's proposal. Pulled from "insignificance" and given the power of refusal—woman's sole meaningful power in a patriarchal marriage plot—she experiences this offering as "a sort of empire." The linkages between imperial power and patriarchy are well-established in the novel at this point: Gwendolen and her mother materially benefitted from their family's vaguely-described links to the West Indies, and her stepfather, Captain Davilow, likely involved the family in a military-colonial career that became too mobile, "roving from one foreign watering-place or Parisian apartment to another" and unsettling their social ranking (17). These formative experiences bolstered Gwendolen's narcissism; a lineage of imperial wealth and cosmopolitan movement "had only deepened her sense that so exceptional a person as herself could hardly remain in ordinary

circumstances” (17). Her tenure “at a showy school” ties Gwendolen’s identity firmly to performance and spectacle. But here, Gwendolen’s vision of empire and its relation to power overlooks a crucial component of the exchange. Her perception of retaining “some sort of empire” over her own life is a false premise. In accepting marriage, she allows Grandcourt to play the role he desires as emperor, losing her own power of refusal and the self-authorship it affords.

As Gwendolen ponders her decision, the narration becomes increasingly impressionistic, gradually overwhelming her. The syntax following her self-reflexive question, “how to use it?”, is fragmented grammatically and perceptually, usurping whatever power she felt she had in the matter. Eliot continues to conflate Gwendolen’s history with a violent textuality, as she looks back at her life as though it were “pictures in a book beaten open with a sense of hurry.” The sensational language and breathy, embodied form of Gwendolen’s interior monologue represents her subjective reality; to call this terror “native” is to liken it to experiences “inherent, innate” (“native”). Eliot reverses conventional alignments between formal realism/sensation and reason/hysteria. Gwendolen’s experiences *prior to* this narrated terror are shown to be illusory, and this reaction, typical of sensation and Gothic novels of the nineteenth century, is imbued with affective, psychological reality.

The notion of terror as it relates to Gwendolen is linked specifically with Lydia Glasher, the “dark-eyed lady” of the passage whose story doubles Gwendolen’s. Upon meeting Lydia and hearing of Grandcourt’s shady courtship with her, “Gwendolen, watching Mrs Glasher’s face while she spoke, felt a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, ‘I am woman’s life’” (128). Her story is a simple, though tragic, one, revealed unequivocally: after leaving her husband, another figure with a military background, Lydia and

Grandcourt carried on an affair long enough to produce four children. The death of her husband leaves Lydia widowed and available for remarriage, but Grandcourt no longer harbors affection for her. Lydia's concern that Grandcourt remarry is not to sustain their romance or companionship, but because patrilineage must be maintained for her children's material security. Describing Grandcourt's heir as "thrust out of sight"—signaling again the novel's theme of visual recognition and power—Lydia's sole motive is to force Grandcourt to make good on their joint sexual transgressions.

This scene of encounter is an example of "second-sight," a thematic parallel in Daniel's and Gwendolen's plots most often associated with Mordecai, the visionary quasi-mystic Jewish figure who cannot be accommodated by realist descriptors. Eliot names second-sight explicitly in regards to only three figures—Mordecai, Lush, and Anna—and defines it as such in her narration:

"Second-sight" is a flag over disputed ground. But it is matter of knowledge that there are persons whose yearnings, conceptions—nay, travelled conclusions—continually take the form of images which have a foreshadowing power: the deed they would do starts up before them in complete shape, making a coercive type; the event they hunger for or dread rises into vision with a seed-like growth, feeding itself fast on unnumbered impressions. They are not always the less capable of the argumentative process, nor less sane than the commonplace calculators of the market: sometimes it may be that their natures have manifold openings, like the hundred-gated Thebes, where there may naturally be a greater

and more miscellaneous inrush than through a narrow beadle-watched portal. (404)<sup>45</sup>

In imagining Daniel's existence on the river before physically seeing him there, Mordecai is easily granted the powers of second-sight in the novel. Anna foresees the dangers of Rex's horse-riding, and Lush warns Grandcourt against marriage with Gwendolen. Daniel, importantly, is *not* gifted with this ability by the narration; despite the fact that his plot would appear to accommodate these strange premonitions, especially as he saves Mirah or determines to build a Jewish nation, his "was not one of those quivering-poised natures that lend themselves to second-sight" (403). Rather, he is a man in the right place at the right time; coincidence appears more important to his narrative than premonitory, mystical fates. In this way, then, Eliot makes clear that a certain receptivity to terror produces these premonitory visions, an admixture of prediction and desire particularly suitable to those that regularly produce a heightened affect.

While Gwendolen's narrative is not explicitly tied with the notion of second-sight—the term is used only four times in the novel, and each use is cited above—she is, arguably, the most frequent supplier of its narrative uses. Gwendolen sees her life, and her unlived lives, unfurled before her in thematic and formal doublings that suggest this capacity.<sup>46</sup> In her work with Victorian renderings of psychological trauma, Jill Matus postulates that "[t]he novelist's foreshadowing of Grandcourt's death in the image of the face and fleeing figure hints that Gwendolen may be prone to second sight" (67). Beyond parallels between Gwendolen's terror at

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<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, "unnumbered impressions" is similar to the descriptor Eliot uses to consider the representation of character earlier. The ability to read character well involves a certain plasticity of mind that can account for multiplicity, just as in these premonitory visions.

<sup>46</sup> As discussed more thoroughly in the previous chapter, the utter strangeness of visual culture in the nineteenth century may be responsible for some of these anti-mimetic, non-realist slippages in otherwise realist works. In the case of second-sight, Jordan Bear remarks in *Disillusioned: Victorian Photography and the Discerning Subject* that second-sight had some public life as a magic trick. After blindfolding his son, the French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin would take objects from audience members and ask his son to "see" what they were (46).

the dead face in the panel, flung open during her tableau performance as Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, and Grandcourt's later drowning, Gwendolen's encounter with Lydia represents this psychological, temporal wormhole also. Rejected, disempowered, used—Gwendolen's dark premonitions upon seeing Lydia, who represents “woman's life,” invoke fear regardless of the decision Gwendolen makes about her proposal. To reject Grandcourt is to reject her own autonomy and triumph over him, to be “thrust out of sight” like Lydia and her family, the recipient of no material benefit. But accepting his proposal similarly rejects another kind of autonomy, as she willingly offers herself as an object to be placed very much *in* his sight: surveilled and used at his discretion.<sup>47</sup>

If Eliot grants Gwendolen the same mechanism for prophetic, world-building visions as the novel's mystical and non-realist Mordecai, then why give Daniel the imaginatively rich, fulfilling conclusion? Daniel, with Mordecai's spiritual blessing and an Angel in the House in tow, sets off to forge a new nation. The earlier formlessness of his aspiration converts to a critical detachment that makes him, in the narrative's logic, suitable for the critical work of nation-building, as in Amanda Anderson's well-known argument.<sup>48</sup> Though capable of second-sight to greater levels than Daniel, Eliot shows through this doubled plot the limitations specifically for women within realism. While Daniel's visions are materially productive, if

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<sup>47</sup> And use her, he does. Catherine Gallagher makes a compelling case for reading the relationship between Grandcourt and Gwendolen in the context of nineteenth-century political economy, particularly through marginal utility theory. First considered by William Stanley Jevons, marginal utility theory postulates that the value of a commodity is not consistent throughout its use; in other words, as more of a commodity is acquired, the consumer's pleasure in the use of that commodity weakens. Citing a letter written by Eliot fearing her own over-production of similarly-themed aesthetic works and their reception, Gallagher suggests that Grandcourt exhibits traits of a “lukewarm consumer” (135) who requires that Gwendolen continue changing her performances to appease his dying interest. These intensified bouts of performance are linked to the “blasé reader” of her fictions. Turning Grandcourt's abusiveness into sensationalized violence serves the interests of the reader, glutted with fictions voraciously consumed, and requires some reflexivity on the aims and pleasures of fiction. Read differently, though, Eliot's cited letter expressing anxiety about the over-production of similar fictions reveals her desire to create differently in *Daniel Deronda*—to expose and break the limitations of realism, the aesthetic to which she attaches her longer works.

<sup>48</sup> See *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*.

vague, the abstract formlessness of Gwendolen's ambition is rendered a narrative problem of illegibility that eventually becomes tied to even vaguer affective intensities of terror and dread.

Calling this phenomenon the “formless vague” in social histories of hysteria, Athena Vrettos analyzes nineteenth-century discourse surrounding hysteria, the body, and pain. Using Alice James, Henry James's sister, as a case study, Vrettos describes how James fought against descriptors of her pain as hysterical by writing private diary entries seeking self-authorship. Upon discovering she had cancer, James declared that this diagnosis legitimized her pain and “lift[ed] us out of the formless vague” to find “the very heart of the sustaining concrete” (qtd. Vrettos 552). Vrettos ties James's insight to Gwendolen's narrative, as she, too, “seems to experience her life in terms of a private counter-narrative that challenges the cultural and ideological presuppositions of the novel's dominant narrative voice” (553). The dominant narrative voice in Gwendolen's case is the voice of conventional realism—a constrained, materially-bound, determinative omniscience that casts women in limited plots that begin to look, in Eliot's Anglo-centric view, like the oppressive workings of imperial power.<sup>49</sup> Gwendolen's hysterical terror should be read through this framework, then, as a rebellion against realist convention.

The Gwendolen plot's slip into sensational language provides Eliot with an aesthetic form that rejects these limiting conventions to investigate more deeply the *affective* realities of guilt and marital violence. Eliot maintains continuity to her earlier form, though, by communicating these affective intensities through visual modes. As she reads Lydia's condemnatory letter, Gwendolen's “eyes were spell-bound,” or so “[i]t seemed,” until she is gripped with “a new spasm of terror [that] made her lean forward and stretch out the paper

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<sup>49</sup> For a look at the complexities and ambivalences of Eliot's relationship to colonial enterprises—familial, financial, and political—see Nancy Henry's essay “George Eliot and the Colonies.”

towards the fire, lest accusation and proof at once should meet all eyes” (*DD* 303). Gwendolen’s initial arrested vision quickly recalls the “terror” of “woman’s life” and forces Gwendolen to reject the very desire integral to her self-authorship: her visibility. Not only does she seek to destroy the visible, material evidence proving her knowledge of Grandcourt’s history, but the letter also disallows the illusion of her exceptionality. Rather, “[s]he could not see the reflections of herself then: they were like so many women petrified white; but coming near herself you might have seen the tremor in her lips and hands” (303). Prior to the terror, Gwendolen luxuriates in her image and uses all opportunity to watch herself, or to view others watching her. As stated above, image as social currency constructs Gwendolen’s sense of self, and she corrals these perceptions for the purposes of social mobility. But when that mobility reaches its conclusion—when she confronts her closure, through marital stagnation, of a flirtatious plot premised in possibility—the illusory nature of her authority even within that earlier plot is brought to bear. In the Gwendolen plot’s “‘deterministic’ law of realism,” particularly when doubled with Daniel’s “romantic quest,” Gwendolen is revealed to be “*already* the fettered prisoner she fears becoming in marriage, an embodiment of upper-class Victorian femininity ‘held captive’” (Boone 178, 175). Eliot’s recognition of the ideological gridlock her realist works are situated in, then, requires a certain escape from realist aesthetics toward more capacious, though less conventionally realist, form. To make visibly discernible the psychological realities of an ambitious and largely unexceptional woman, whose imagination is confined by discourses of compulsory heterosexuality and marital economy, Eliot departs from realism.

The startling Gothicism of feeling like “so many women petrified white” (*DD* 303) deadens Gwendolen’s previously mobile energies. She confronts the closure of her plot in the death knell of Lydia’s letter, where Lydia chillingly asserts that Grandcourt’s love can never be

revived for anyone but herself: “The man you have married has a withered heart. His best young love was mine; you could not take that from me when you took the rest. It is dead; but I am the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried as well as mine.” Faced with this unsatisfying closure, Gwendolen recognizes her uncomfortable alliance with the fate of “so many women” in these narratives. By moving from an observational aesthetic that separates Gwendolen visually from other women, to a sensationalized, even Gothic aesthetic that marks patterns of entrapment for women, Eliot plants another reversal that highlights the similarities of the motives undergirding these distinct plots. The same spectacle that grants the heroine exceptionalism in the realist world injures her. Revealing our desire for Gwendolen and a marital partner—Grandcourt or Daniel—forces the self-reflexive recognition of how “[t]he reader, thus, is made an accomplice in the act of conventional fiction-making and as such becomes part of *Deronda*’s education in another mode of reading and writing lives” (Boone 176-7). While Joseph Allen Boone notes that Daniel’s plot “leav[es] behind the English world of the reading audience” for more romantic narratives, in doubling this plot with Gwendolen’s, Eliot “expos[es] wedlock as something less than a happy conclusion . . . [and] succeeds in calling into question the social order underlying the traditional order of fiction itself” (187). In reversing the reader’s expectations of that tradition, Eliot accomplishes more accurate, if anti-realist, modes of representing the injuries and confinements of this conventional realist vision.

Visual indicators of Gwendolen’s transgression continue to mount in this passage, as Grandcourt enters the room to collect her for dinner: “The sight of him,” the narration indicates, “brought a new nervous shock, and Gwendolen screamed again and again with hysterical violence” (*DD* 303). Just after, the narration reveals Grandcourt’s perception of her:

He had expected to see her dressed and smiling, ready to be led down. He saw her pallid, shrieking as it seemed with terror, the jewels scattered around her on the floor. Was it a fit of madness?

In some form or other the Furies had crossed his threshold. (303)

Transitioning into Grandcourt's perceptual interiority, we see Gwendolen from the outside; however, this view of her is quite similar from what is represented as internal reality. Eliot does not represent this as, Marlene Tromp argues, a "sensationalized, *performative* madness" (452, emphasis added), but a visible display of pain commensurate with the internal experience of injury that Gwendolen suffers. Eliot aligns Grandcourt's visual perception and Gwendolen's guilt through the shared signifier "terror," and marks this space of chiasmic visual communication at the "threshold," caught between narrative and perceptual modes. Though I disagree with Tromp's claim that Gwendolen *performs* this "madness" to retain some agency over a life that has been handed to her husband, her essay smartly calls attention to the ease with which critics assign sensational tropes to Gwendolen's injuries as a way of dismissing the concrete concerns that underlie such representations. If this were a narrative of working class marital violence, Tromp speculates, it would not be so quickly read and dismissed as sensational. Part of Eliot's project is to show that the sensational can be embedded within reality, "draw[ing] the private into public discourse, exposing how the conventions of reason and realism camouflage intrafamilial violence" (456). Though women's pain in the novel is narrated through sensational and Gothic language, it remains consistently narrated this way: the lives of Gwendolen, Lydia, Mirah, and even the Alcharisi all escape conventional realist modes to articulate a shared reality that feels, for them, more intensely confining than a realist aesthetic accommodates because the positivist omniscience of the narrating eye is hegemonically male. In this way, Gwendolen's "madness"

does not represent a feigned, hysterical strategy for retrieving some authority; it represents a break from what had been a performance staged earlier in conventionally realist environments. If the hysterical is simply the body's way of symptomizing psychological distress, the "formless vague" of ideological conscription and diminished individual agency, then Gwendolen's "madness" is perhaps the most real, and least performative, rupture within the novel.

Part of Gwendolen's pain is *only* legible through these hysterical ruptures. While her guilt is given material form in the "poisoned gems" (303) once belonging to Lydia that Grandcourt forces her to wear, there are notable silences in Gwendolen's past that Louise Penner has argued reveal a history of repressed sexual violence. Mention of Gwendolen's stepfather, Captain Davilow, is brief and typically met with fear. Penner links this silence to a problem of paternal authority throughout the novel: for Gwendolen, Mirah, and the Alcharisi alike. However, the Alcharisi and Mirah are both granted narrative space to tell their stories of parental negligence or domineering restriction, while Gwendolen is often silenced or too stunned to tell.<sup>50</sup> In Penner's sympathetic reading of Gwendolen, she highlights how little readers know about her stepfather; we only know she feared him, did not want him to come home, and wished her mother did not remarry. Her "madness," if we can call it that, should not be read as something that arises singularly from the love triangle she has found herself in. Rather, it develops as a reaction formation to a longer history of verbal and visual abuses that finally break through when her plot resolution is assumed.

With this feminist framework in mind, it is difficult to read Gwendolen's guilt as highly individualized. While she takes the place of a family that has more claim to Grandcourt's wealth,

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<sup>50</sup> Penner's argument links these absences to G.H. Lewes's theory of mind. Adopting physical theories of the universe, Lewes believed that memory and other mental functions were like matter: they can be neither created nor destroyed, and instead circulate in other ways. Penner argues that the "presence" of detail in other stories draws our attention to the silences of Gwendolen's history.

which he has inherited by circuitous means anyway, she also reflects a cog within a larger system of abuse. Any interpretation of Gwendolen's narcissism must be read in the context of more encompassing social realities which place a high premium on women-as-spectacle, and any representation of Gwendolen's hysteria must similarly be placed within the context of marital and gendered economies. As Ann Cvetkovich argues, sensationalism often converts structural problems into narratives of individual transgression. But Gwendolen's is not a singular narrative; it is a narrative case within a wider "discursive field" where excessive affect authorizes particular forms of disciplinary power seeking to contain those dangerous, feminized energies (10).

Grandcourt's "domination of Gwendolen is not just the analogue of imperialism but its extension. . . . Rather than perverting the institution of marriage, Grandcourt's sadism exposes the power relations inherent in the contract; marriage is not a public declaration of mutual affection but an institution that legalizes the husband's right to control his wife" (134, 137).

Cvetkovich's Foucauldian reading of the novel suggests that the subjectivity created through the novel's discourse on marriage and imperial power ultimately makes it so that "Grandcourt's domination works so well because Gwendolen freely assents to it; she condemns herself for her choice, for losing what she sees as a fair fight, rather than assigning responsibility to Grandcourt or to a social institution whose nature it is to deprive her of any real power" (140). Contrary to Tromp's argument, where Gwendolen is granted agency through this symptomatic rendering of her injuries, Cvetkovich takes a broader look at disciplinary mechanisms embedded within the text that produce Gwendolen's heightened affective responses and authorize forms of containment.

It is important to note, too, that the injuries of male spectatorship narrated through sensational language are extended to Gwendolen's relationship with Daniel. While Grandcourt

explicitly surveils her with full mastery as his intent, Gwendolen admits just as frequently “how much I am afraid of Mr Deronda” because he exhibits “an evil eye” (350). Sympathetic Daniel, savior of the novel’s women and a character explicitly rejected from exhibiting second sight, is a strange contender for the narrative’s “evil eye.” But it is through Daniel’s benevolent patriarchy that Eliot articulates the subtlety of realism’s confinements most compellingly. As Gwendolen’s symptoms are further articulated as excess affect, Daniel’s gentle condemnation proves more useful to binding those energies into a moralistic domesticity. Though his efforts with Gwendolen ultimately reaffirm the patriarchal violence within the novel, Eliot softens his control through distinct visual language.

#### Daniel, Her Formless Double

Similarly to Gwendolen’s hysterical language, Daniel’s “vividness of his impressions” make for “an apparent indefiniteness in his sentiments” (307). Both characters share a heightened susceptibility to visual stimuli and work to uncover meaning within the visual, and in both cases, this hypervisual mode leads to a lack of clarity. For Gwendolen, this formlessness finds its symptom in hysterical embodiments and premonitory visions, a reaction to the abstract violences attending hypervisibility and feminine performativity. Daniel, marginalized by his dispossession of Sir Hugo’s estate and later through the discovery of his Jewish ancestry, recuperates his formless subjectivity into a generative, creative force. He recognizes, the narration reveals, that “[a] too reflective and diffusive sympathy was in danger of paralysing in him that indignation against wrong and that selectness of fellowship which are the conditions of moral force” (308). He searches for “a definite line of action” to “compress his wandering energy.” Though his “indefiniteness” necessitates a single material project, it is considered a credit to his character that allows him to embody and imagine myriad forms: a poetic sensibility, heightened

spirituality, and even, in Amanda Anderson's reading, a "cultivated partiality" that critically and dialectically engages with cultural norms and ideologies (121). The novel's titular character is persistently celebrated for his indeterminacy, his formlessness, because it indicates a more careful "selectness of fellowship" later. But Daniel can only be granted this period of formlessness that leads to "selectness" because he is a male character; the timeframe and possibilities for Gwendolen's "selectness of fellowship" are rather narrow, hemmed in by social convention. Eliot doubles these searching narratives to show the extent to which gender predetermines ethical, creative possibility.

Indeterminacy and uncertainty, it becomes clear, are part and parcel of the embodied ethical project Eliot investigates in *Daniel Deronda*. They are also erotic fixtures in her fiction, as Daniel Wright explores:

Eliot is concerned with the paradoxical interdependence of likeness and difference, or with the ways in which the distinctions that make form possible and perceptible appear, upon closer inspection, to waver and blur. She is concerned, in other words, with the philosophical problem of vagueness and its way of hobbling our capacity to perceive separateness: the exact point of transition from light to dark or from sour to sweet. (626)

Using Will Ladislav's assertion that "language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague," Wright analyzes how the vague articulates an ethical reality that more fully embraces meaningful multiplicity. For Eliot, ethical life is dependent on imprecise language, influenced by eroticism. Precision is futile, as language itself is a hazy medium only asymptotically reaching its object. As his essay pivots to psychoanalysis, Wright aligns clarity with difference/form, vagueness with sameness/formlessness. Using Leo Bersani, he agrees that

“Art . . . is the means by which we work through our anxiety about the tenuousness of form and the inaccessibility of its origins by imagining situations in which the formal relations of art seem to have arisen out of thin air, and thus just as easily can dissolve again” (640).

This blurry haze of indeterminacy contains an erotic drive—consider, again, Gwendolen’s flirtatious suggestion to Grandcourt that they remain arrested in a state of “uncertainty,” where the dynamics of sexual power are unstable, shifting, and therefore charged. The pleasures of this indeterminacy are temporarily foreclosed when Gwendolen agrees to marriage, where those dynamics are made static, thus forcing her narrative into sensational aesthetics that articulate vagueness anew. Daniel, however, benefits from a prolonged indeterminacy that is not resolved by his own miniature marriage plot. His descriptions of Mirah, his bride-to-be, convey Daniel’s departure from an earlier voyeuristic eye, articulated in passages with Gwendolen, and his embrace of the erotically imprecise and impressionistic:

Imagine her—it is always good to imagine a human creature in whom bodily loveliness seems as properly one with the entire being as the bodily loveliness of those wondrous transparent orbs of life that we find in the seas—imagine her with her dark hair brushed from her temples, but yet showing certain tiny rings there which had cunningly found their own way back, the mass of it hanging behind just to the nape of the neck in curly fibres, such as renew themselves at their own will after being bathed into straightness like that of water-grasses. (314)

The passage begins in the imperative mood, blending Daniel’s singular perception of Mirah at the piano with the narration’s bluntly authoritative command to visualize her through his eyes. The passage is suffused with language Wright would identify as vague, particularly because of its oceanic quality. Sigmund Freud’s discussion of the “‘oceanic’ feeling” within religious

sentiment, which Wright references in his article, melts the ego, that marker of differentiation, with “something limited, boundless” (11). The oceanic recalls an infantile attachment to the mother before the formation of the ego. In this phase of psychological development, the infant feels a polymorphously erotic connection to the external world because that world is not yet understood as separate from the infant’s body. The imprecision of the language within this passage—metaphors of fluidity, the undefined “transparent orbs of life,” the seductive use of the word “bathed”—marks Mirah’s exceptionality as “one” undifferentiated from these other symbols of boundlessness. Even as the passage particularizes her physicality, casting an erotic eye on her “temples” and “the nape of the neck,” it refuses a clear and total depiction of her outline. In contrast to Gwendolen’s “form,” a way of drawing attention to the confluences of the sexual and textual in Gwendolen’s plot, Mirah’s description is granted an erotic ambiguity that soothes rather than threatens.

Ideologically, Mirah is a safe woman. She is a dependent figure rescued by Daniel; her singing voice is far more beautiful than Gwendolen’s, but is used only to entertain and not as a means of economic independence; she is closest to a typified Victorian Angel in the House, transforming the Meyrick residence with her gentle nature; and she is held under the sway of her father until that paternalistic authority is handed off to Daniel through marriage. The reader is seduced into desiring the undifferentiated, oceanic, calming eroticism of Mirah’s passage, and that is precisely the point. As Daniel’s romance plot embeds a marriage plot within it, the reader again wishes for the teleology of marital closure that reinscribes Daniel’s authority.

Daniel’s and Gwendolen’s meetings retain erotic visual exchanges as well that aestheticize Daniel’s authority over her. Eliot uses the language of indeterminacy to stage these interactions; for instance, the narrator vaguely marks “an appreciable space of time” that “others

could not have measured” wherein we learn of the characters’ intended communication through the narrator’s best guess: “she seeming to take the deep rest of confession, he with an answering depth of sympathy that neutralized other feelings” (352). The qualifier “seeming” suggests that the novel’s knowledge of these characters can only extend so far. The narration interprets these visual cues with a hint of indeterminacy to leave open their ambiguity. Importantly, though, the interpretations condition the reader to accept certain outcomes: Gwendolen yearns for the peace that “confession” may bring, and Daniel matches her yearning with his desire to console the suffering other. Just after, other bodily signs indicate that Gwendolen’s “look of confession had been involuntary” as she subtly indicates a “just perceptible shake and change of countenance” (352). Additionally, Daniel’s interior perception and omniscient narration are again conflated to align his vision with a kind of objectivity the reader sees as reality.

This disciplinary reading of Daniel’s eye, though, does not reveal all that Eliot does with these exchanges. As much as Daniel subtly and benevolently reinscribes patriarchal power, he also yearns for the ambiguity and hazy interpretation the novel values as a philosophical rejection of traditional realist closures. Daniel’s and Gwendolen’s “deep affections . . . are a mixture—half persons and half ideas” (357), resisting a formal boundedness or discreteness. Eliot even holds open communicative possibility through their bodily signs; when Gwendolen visits Daniel, “their eyes met—to her intense vexation, for it seemed to her that by looking at him she had betrayed the reference of her thoughts, and she felt herself blushing” (360). Alarmed at the possibility of too revelatory a corporeal sign, the narration intervenes to push against this certainty:

If any had noticed her blush as significant, they had certainly not interpreted it by the secret windings and recesses of her feeling. A blush is no language: only a

dubious flag-signal which may mean either of two contradictories. Deronda alone had a faint guess at some part of her feeling; but while he was observing her he was himself under observation. (360)

Eliot draws attention to the multiplicities of interpretive experience in this short passage, highlighting the probability of a perceiver's myopia when reading exteriors. The blush does not offer access to genuine, unmediated feeling, but is its own complex sign. The use of "flag-signal," a bizarre descriptor for a bodily response, along with the emphasis on vision within this passage links to the novel's description of second-sight, "a flag over disputed ground" (404), that comes later. Daniel admits "a faint guess" (360) regarding the origins of Gwendolen's blush, guided by his interpretation of the event but allowing space for alternatives. Likewise, his observation of Gwendolen leaves his body open to the perceptions of others—in this case, Grandcourt—layering interpretive gazes within a short passage. As the novel opens with a panoply of diverse looks, so too does the novel's middle sustain the heterogeneous methods of interpretation, reading, and observation colliding within social space.

Even as these intense visual interchanges between the novels' key figures stage a certain openness of interpretation, a push against rigid forms towards something more tentative, the narrative's march toward necessary closure simultaneously works to convert Gwendolen's vision to something more like the vision Daniel already embodies. Seeking his guidance, Gwendolen guiltily submits to certain ideological strictures commonplace to the realist novel. Her plot represents a movement from external dilemmas to internal contradictions. As John Kucich argues, "the moral impulse in Eliot seems in large part an effort to master external constraints by subjecting them to an inward dialectic, a dialectic that converts constraints into catalysts for inward desire, for self-completion" (129). In an attempt to refigure the repressive nature of

Victorian fiction in terms of autonomy and “self-negating libidinal satisfaction” (32), with refusal serving as a kind of eros, Kucich notes that “specialness” of character is often represented in Eliot’s fiction as “repressive self-conflict” (165). The more illegible a character appears to others, then, the better suited for revealing Eliot’s ethical and representational motives.

Kucich helps clarify why the “contradictories” of externally-readable signs, like the blush, are invested with an erotic energy that animates the interpretive process, a narrative force that Eliot keeps energized. However, he finds that this tendency reproduces a liberal notion of the discrete individual, cut off from meaningful forms of social organization, ultimately “leaving the characters in an eerie kind of kinship vacuum” (177). I push back on this analysis, though, because it does not take into consideration the intimate visual interpenetration that produces strange affective, libidinal investments in the other. Through the deepening significations of the visual, Gwendolen and Daniel form a visual chiasmus wherein each character’s story is intimately, inextricably bound to the other and follow reverse trajectories. Daniel’s sympathy is necessarily sharpened by Gwendolen—after all, Eliot celebrates a “judgment no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with that noble partiality which is man’s best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical” (638). This pragmatic approach to sympathy involves the embodied effort of “drawing shoulder to shoulder” rather than remaining untethered at a “bird’s-eye” view. It necessarily involves entanglement and embodied relation; it cannot be accomplished without giving part of oneself over to another, and returning to one’s consciousness for re-evaluation (as in Irigaray’s intersubjective return, discussed in chapter one). Just after coming to this realization, Daniel determines to find Mirah and “to see her in the light of a new possibility, to interpret her looks and words from a new starting-point” (638). It is Daniel’s continued myopia, though, that suggests to him that this

newer version of sympathy must be separate from Gwendolen. It is because of Gwendolen that Daniel is able to come to terms with this important self-actualization.

In its reversal, Gwendolen's interpretations of Daniel's vision result in a transformation that partly self-polices according to his command, partly converts external social tension into the "inward dialectic" Kucich identifies, and—more optimistically—releases Gwendolen from the forms of realist narrative closure that originally confined her. After Gwendolen begins to interpret every action following her proposal acceptance with deep dread, guilt, and horror, she demonstrates the capacity to imagine herself from the outside in a critical vein. Whereas before she "object[ed] to any eyes that are critical" (351), referring specifically to Daniel's gaze, Gwendolen eventually embraces Daniel's critique of her solipsism, "learn[ing] to see all her acts through the impression they would make on Deronda" (576). Following Grandcourt's death, the objectification of her impressions becomes more abstract and less dependent Daniel as interlocutor, as "she looked away from Deronda towards something at a distance from her on the floor. Was she seeing the whole event—her own acts included—through an exaggerating medium of excitement and horror?" (590-1). Gwendolen becomes better able to gauge her responses according to her own interpretive apparatus. What was sensationalism is converted to a particular analytical standpoint. This position can be occupied meaningfully, as it unveils certain affective realities, and it can also be objectified and understood as a particular position—that is, it can be understood ideologically, as constructed rather than essentially feminine.

In an important scene of sympathetic exchange between the two following Grandcourt's death and Gwendolen's severe guilt, Daniel uses the language of sight to articulate his recommendation for her renewed sense of self. "Looking at your life as a debt may seem the dreariest view of things at a distance," he tells her, "but it cannot really be so. What makes life

dreary is the want of motive; but once beginning to act with that penitential, loving purpose you have in your mind, there will be unexpected satisfactions” (658). In this final piece of advice, Daniel recalls his own revelation about his sympathetic powers. Rather than taking a “distance[d]” survey of suffering that produces sympathy for Daniel, dread for Gwendolen, Daniel implores her to “act” within the material relations she will return to upon meeting her mother. Just as his sympathy requires an embodied entanglement of wills, motives, and desires, Gwendolen, too, must convert that which is too quickly cannibalized by her own interiority as dread and guilt into outward-reaching, recuperative relations.

Though their visual exchanges are structured like a chiasm, wherein each visual interpenetration produces a greater understanding of sympathy and reality, Eliot does not grant her characters similar conclusions. Daniel works to convert Gwendolen’s narrative to a romantic vision quest for goodness, and Gwendolen works to narrow Daniel’s diffusive imagination to a singular material problem, but only one of these characters reaches positive self-actualization. Interestingly, though, Gwendolen reverses the reader’s narrative expectations while underlining the ideological strictures of this perceptively-rich realism. Daniel’s voyage out of the English realist novel towards something more akin to Romantic adventure requires a marriage plot for completion. On the contrary, Gwendolen’s marriage plot violently ends before the novel does, leaving her story largely inconclusive. The doubling effect of these conclusions requires that they be read in tandem, particularly to come to our own conclusions about Eliot’s more experimental, imaginatively envisioned realist project.

### Refusing Realism

The visual in *Daniel Deronda* is, as demonstrated, a rather heterogeneous interpretive scheme. The language of visibility denotes spectacle, voyeurism, surveillance, hallucination, and

dread as much as it signifies possibility, interpretation, imagination, action, and creation. It is this indecision that marks the realist project by the end of Eliot's writing career. She aims to discover the ethical, sensuous, and self-affirming qualities of the vague and ambiguous. Limited by the constraints of a realist form, partly of her own making, she rejects rigidity in *Daniel Deronda* in favor of the formless gesture toward the infinite or unknown.

Rethinking realism in this formalist and aesthetic way, though, must be put into dialogue with two of Eliot's primary interlocutors in natural philosophy: Ludwig Feuerbach and George Henry Lewes. Eliot's translation of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* suggests ways of interpreting the tensions of mind and body, self and spirit, internality and externality that occupies Gwendolen's narrative. In Feuerbach's preface to his second edition, he announces his allegiance to realism, which he defines through materialism and in contrast to Hegelian philosophy. He understands "thought from the *opposite* of thought, from Matter, from existence, from the senses" (xxxv), ultimately in the service of "unveil[ing]" reality and conditioning others "to *see* correctly" (xxxvi). Following an empirical tradition, Feuerbach centralizes the role of the senses in developing an understanding of man's essence and its relation to the spiritual world. He admits this quite bluntly: "for *my* thought I require the sense, especially sight; I found my ideas on materials which can be appropriated only through the activity of sense" (xxxiv). In part, Feuerbach's faith in the perceivable and material comes from the notion that human consciousness is, itself, God; to put it another way, Feuerbach argues that the infinite as imagined by the human mind only serves to prove the existence of the infinite within human thought. Stated simply, "Consciousness . . . is identical with consciousness of the infinite" (2). The idea of God within religion is merely an external representation or manifestation of what already belongs to internal human consciousness. The ability to comprehend something like

infinity makes consciousness possible to infinite permutations and possibilities. The ideal, the immaterial, has already been located in the internal and material world of the thinking, feeling, perceiving body.

Part of what makes human consciousness meaningful as an infinite realm of possibility is the ability to think outside of the self and take one's mind as an object. Feuerbach believes that the essence of man, religion, is just a way of thinking anthropologically about the self and the species, an externalization of possibility and ideality originally conceived through the mind (12). In a similar vein, George Henry Lewes argues in *Problems of Life and Mind* that a theory of outward reality must take into account co-constitutive relations between the interior and exterior. Even "Science is in no respect a plain transcript of Reality . . . but wholly an ideal construction in which the manifold relations of Reals are taken up and assimilated by the mind" (342). As in Eliot's opening epigraph, where she personifies science as a masculine "strict measurer," science is deemed a method of interpretation, not a singular authority. To make science strictly authoritative is to diminish the impact of imaginative vision to human thinking and reason. Instead, recognizing varied interpretations of realities when accommodated by human subjectivity has a creative, imaginative force:

it seeks to reveal the processes of Reals, the Laws of Things, that thereby we may so modify the conjunctures of events as to render events our servants; or so modify our attitude towards events as to reconcile us to the fatalities we cannot alter. (342)

The representation of reality in fiction, then, must be read as performing these two functions: reading with the intent to transform or "modify" existing perspectives, and reading to make

visible and bearable the contingencies and laws “we cannot alter”: time, death, and the curbing of desire.

In *Daniel Deronda*, Mordecai offers a similar approach to the role of vision in determining reality, marking the concomitance of perception, imagination, and realism: “visions are the creators and feeders of the world. I see, I measure the world as it is, which the vision will create anew” (426). Material reality permeates imaginative ideality; the imagination depends upon the possibilities already existent within the material world. “Even in dreams,” Feuerbach declares, “we do not find ourselves in emptiness or in heaven, but on earth, in the realm of reality” (xxxix). Internal visions rely upon possibilities in the outer world, and Eliot applauds in *Daniel Deronda* a vision that works as a creative force rather than the positivist, observational visions of her earlier fictions.

The capaciousness of this new realist vision authorizes Eliot’s expansion of narrative possibility. Though criticism tends to cleave *Daniel Deronda* into the realist/romance split, neatly aligning its dual plots with already-established forms (and I have echoed this tendency earlier, too), a closer reading shows the commingling of literary forms that reveals the imaginative possibilities that lie within realism itself. Consciousness in fiction is a question of form, and Eliot pushes against the limitations on that consciousness by holding open, somewhat vaguely, the range of representational possibilities in her final novel. A traditional realist marriage plot blends into a sensation narrative of marital violence, which itself blends into a rescue plot also haunted by patriarchal violence, which eventually lends itself to a quest for novelty.

Eliot also shows the double-edged sword of representing this vision of reality. An emphasis on the material world holds Gwendolen from self-actualization and plants her in a

predetermined plot. Eliot releases her from this plot, though, with the death of her husband, an event that expands Gwendolen's perspective while still grounding it in material possibility.

Daniel asks her to "take hold of your sensibility, and use it as if it were a faculty, like vision" (388). Gwendolen's ability to use a new, imaginative vision is evidenced clearly upon her return to Offendene, a space she initially considered small and uninspiring. The passage narrating her change of heart regarding this property reveals a new approach to the perverse ends realism brought her to earlier:

Gwendolen had turned with a changed glance when her mother spoke of Offendene being empty . . . All that brief experience of a quiet home which had once seemed a dullness to be fled from, now came back to her as a restful escape, a station where she found the breath of morning and the unreproaching voice of birds, after following a lure through a long Satanic masquerade, which she had entered on with an intoxicated belief in its disguises, and had seen the end of in shrieking fear lest she herself had become one of the evil spirits who were dropping their human mummery and hissing around her with serpent tongues. . . . Gwendolen sat by like one who had visited the spiritworld and was full to the lips of an unutterable experience that threw a strange unreality over all. . . (651-2)

In one of the novel's last great reversals, Gwendolen returns to the scene of her prior discontent, seeing it now with a "changed glance." Rather than a space of "dullness" and monotony, it is perceived as her way out of the accelerated narrative of closure she never wanted to be a part of anyway. It becomes a "restful escape," a place of pause that leaves the marriage plot behind.

Following flowery language that embellishes and aestheticizes this new perspective, Eliot reveals that the plot we considered realist—the marriage plot of pursuit and closure—was in fact a

“Satanic masquerade.” In startlingly condemnatory prose, Eliot critiques what Gwendolen had essentialized in her own consciousness before Grandcourt’s death—an “intoxicat[ing] belief in disguises,” an adherence to the spectacle of reality. We circle back to the opening of the novel, where Gwendolen is also described with serpentine imagery, to mark her psychological and ideological removal from this seemingly realist world. Instead, it is a world of illusion; Gwendolen thinks of it as a “spiritworld,” immaterial, ultimately “a strange unreality.” Gwendolen’s ability to imagine herself as others see her has been a part of her psychological existence all along; the highly theatricalized space of the social marked Gwendolen as a figure for spectacle, a form to be looked at, interpreted, positioned within a predetermined social identity. But it is only her ability to read that self as an object through multiple lenses that creates a complexity aligning her more closely with psychological realism, while her relation to conventional Victorian realism increasingly reveals the illusory premises of this materialist and, at times, unreflective representational mode.

Just as the novel problematizes beginnings, assigning them an arbitrary and essential place in constructing a meaningful truth, Eliot continues her skepticism of temporal boundedness within realism by problematizing the notion of ending as well. While Mordecai’s dying words “breathed [his] soul into” Daniel (695), suggesting the perpetuity of his and the novel’s imaginative vision as it gestures out into what the English would consider unknown lands, Gwendolen’s final words contain the same indeterminate, imprecise promise of a bettering non-closure. “*I may live to be one of the best of women . . . . I do not yet see how that can be,*” she writes in a letter to Daniel, the italics signifying a disembodied voice separated from his world. Though this disembodiment contains a hint of sadness, the inability to clearly see her life’s trajectory lends itself to the same creative possibility Daniel embodies at the novel’s close. Eliot

refuses to tie Gwendolen to the same narrative potentialities that she embodied, embraced, and violently rejected earlier. The realist plot's marital closures cannot sustain a mind like Gwendolen's, primed like Daniel to carry on the creative possibilities of one with "second-sight." Eliot leaves readers with a single, ambiguous, but soothing promise instead: "*It is better—it shall be better with me because I have known you*" (695).

By the end of her illustrious literary career, after her genius powers of observational realism had been proven time and again, Eliot's final complete fiction embraces the indeterminate. *Daniel Deronda* represents an explicit aesthetic and formal shift away from what she initially terms, in Ruskin's work, "definite, substantial reality." She recuperates the creative, epistemological, and aesthetic values of "vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling" that she earlier condemned as fanciful and unconcerned with truthful understanding. Indeed, as Mordecai gently instructs Daniel and Eliot's rewriting of English realism reveals, "we know not all the pathways" (642).

In its attention to the everyday and its vicissitudes, realism stretches out to grasp these pathways, to represent them in their fullness, to make life recognizable. By the 1870s, though, Eliot's sympathetic realism requires more than careful observation, aestheticized depictions of labor, and scenes of sentimentality packed with poor sufferers. True sympathetic understanding and literary knowledge involves, more persuasively, the capacity to lean into ambivalence and reject the rigidity of predetermined forms. Finally, and most importantly, it means imagining alternative, more ethical and liberatory "pathways" to living meaningfully, apart from what is already observationally apparent to the eye.

## Conclusion

Why does the genre that most reflects the rhythms of the everyday contain so many bizarre passages depicting ambiguous, strange visual experience? What was it about sight in the nineteenth century that created such discomfort? Reading contextually, Victorians were obsessed with vision and its relationship to knowledge because there were so many major global and economic transitions in the era. Under capitalism's expansion, industrialism, and liberalism, notions of individuality, duty, progress, and social power were restructured, altering dynamics in how individuals viewed themselves and how they were viewed externally. At the same time, as Jonathan Crary convincingly shows, sight became increasingly attached to a subjective experience of the world in time, and less about an objective world that could be viewed in the same way by all who see. Sight in the nineteenth century is really about perception, an intensely individualistic and subjective understanding of what is witnessed in the material world.

Strange sight in realism—passages narrating the uncomfortable, uncanny, disturbing, or arresting visuality within social life—depicts this transformation in how consciousness was understood and represented in fiction. More pointedly, the examples of strange sight this project outlines all grapple with the presence and problem of intersubjectivity: the existence, influence, and radical alterity of another's consciousness. As realism represents how a character, particularized through gender, race, family, nationality, class, and labor, is acted upon and reacts to external social forces that structure experience, strange sight registers moments of psychological tension with the outside world. The solipsistic individualism of visual perception faces the inherently social nature of being. Strange sight reckons with the effect of multiple consciousnesses colliding with and co-determining one another. Narratively, it allows for pause from the quick rhythms of plot and dialogue to work through how the presence of an impossible-to-fully-know consciousness intermingles with a character's own experience of his or her

consciousness. At times this can be an ethical exercise, as in the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, which avoids the self-aggrandizing possession of the other. In *Vanity Fair*, to the contrary, the strangeness of vision comes not from an effort to understand and acknowledge the alterity of the other, but to remain derisive of that otherness and uphold the values that make otherness abject and undesirable.

Because of its relationship to character intersubjectivity, then, strange sight is a particularly novelistic form. Uniquely formal strategies of the novel, especially free indirect style, allow it to appear in fiction because this narrative technique already involves the commingling of voices. Free indirect style destabilizes authority in language, while strange sight destabilizes authority spatially and psychologically. The plasticity of the novel also allows strange sight to flourish in nineteenth-century fiction. The novel can and does incorporate nearly every other kind of writing; one can find poetry, song lyrics, letters, pamphlets, manifestos, and sketches in novels. And like the novel, the genre of realism is incredibly malleable, admitting Gothic, sensational, political, historical, essayistic, and even detective fiction into its worlds. As the chapter on Charles Dickens shows, the realist novel is stitched together by disjunctive and partial visions, giving an illusion of wholeness that inevitably dissembles under pressure. To the extent that the realist novel incorporates so many different kinds of styles to articulate social and psychological realities, it may even be more accurate to call realism an aesthetic defined not by what it is, but by what it is not quite.

Strange sight also moves characters from the materiality of everyday encounter to abstraction. Novelists use these passages, sparingly interpolated in their grandiose and lengthy fictions, to theorize social being through visual modes. George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* exemplifies this theory best, particularly in chiasmic visual exchanges between its two

protagonists, to show the limits of material visual knowledge and to envision more imaginative, creative, and egalitarian alternatives. The abstraction may appear hazy and irresolute at times, but Eliot nonetheless suggests that the activity itself is worth engaging in, because a positivist view of reality as defined by patriarchy runs the risk of replicating vicious systems of repression.

Abstraction carries forward into fin de siècle and modernist writing, more often considered impressionistic and experimental than the Victorian realist novel is. Part of what these chapters show is that even in their densely-descriptive, at times conservative, fictions, the Victorians were already taking seriously the nature, faultiness, and promise of visual understanding and its relationship to subjectivity. Realist writers of the nineteenth century, perceived as least likely to delve into the gritty and perverse realms of identity, readied the world for Sigmund Freud, James Joyce, and D.H. Lawrence. When read through strange sight, the Victorian era vibrates with urgent questions about desire that ripple beneath their moralistic social fictions. Through sight, Victorians were investigating the dark and shadowy regions of the unconscious before Freud gave it a name, revealing how desire, sexuality, and identity erupt in everyday social life.

At the end of the nineteenth-century, the project of understanding how vision could gain some access to truth was still in progress. In 1884, Olive Schreiner writes in correspondence with Havelock Ellis, her psychologist and favored pen pal:

. . . did you ever do what I was fond of doing when I was a child, I used to call it "Looking at things really"? Look at your hand, for instance, make an effort of mind, & dis-associate from it every preconceived idea, for instance that it is your hand, that it is part of a human body . . . Look at it simply as an object which

strikes the eye; you will be surprised how new, & strange, & funny it looks, as though you had never seen it before.

Advocating for the imaginative possibilities of defamiliarization, Schreiner implores Ellis to strip away his socially-inherited ideas about this rather ordinary part of his body. The eye allows for a distanced consideration of material objects, objectifying the body so that it can be transformed mentally into something else. Her experiment creates new ways of understanding everyday, entirely familiar objects, but it also suggests that the material world has a strangeness inherent to it that can be accessed if one only concentrates, letting the mind's clutter fall away. In an almost meditative trance, the alterity of reality becomes apparent, and even a little "funny."

Perhaps, then, strange sight populates so much of realist fiction because reality is *strange*. What appears thematically Gothic and dark, uncanny and eruptive, is just another way of articulating what it really means, affectively and psychologically, to be in a world full of other people. The illegibility of sight is only a problem in fiction because being in the world relies heavily on the wills, desires, and judgments of others. As a narrative form that registers that deeply-felt recognition, the alienating experience of having a consciousness perpetually surrounded and interpolated by other mysterious consciousnesses, realism is bound to come off a little odd, mysterious, perhaps even frightening. What can be liberating about this recognition is the cognitive engagement with that alterity, which can inform perception in new ways and generate more capacious ways of knowing and acceptable ways of being. Nineteenth-century realist fiction is, at its root, optimistic that this meaningful interrelatedness can be realized.

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