

UNCOMMON SENSE:
AESTHETICS, LIBERALISM, AND LATE VICTORIAN COGNITIVE SCIENCE

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This dissertation argues that cognitive science emerges in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, transforming the relationship between aesthetic experience and political liberalism in the Victorian imagination. New scientific theories of sensory perception and cognition opened an intractable conflict between two liberal principles underlying Victorian notions of aesthetic experience—the commitment to autonomous agency and the necessity of a shared set of agreements about the world for democratic deliberation and debate. Through readings of literary and scientific texts, I argue that this conflict shapes Victorian conceptions of agency, ethics, and art, as well as several of the period’s most important texts, events, and movements.

Chapters 2 and 3 are case studies of how cognitive science shapes the aesthetic theories governing two major late Victorian novels. Chapter 2, “Raising National Unconsciousness: Neural Writing and Sympathy in *Daniel Deronda*,” argues that George Eliot draws from G.H. Lewes’ description of consciousness as a palimpsest of neural pathways in order to conceive of sympathy as a means of rewriting the mind by reflectively reinterpreting experience. Chapter 3, “Reading in the Dark: Sensory Perception and Agency in *The Return of the Native*,” reads Hardy’s novel in the context of late Victorian psychological theories that characterize sensory perception as a form of interpretation analogous to reading.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the role of cognitive science in the theories, debates, and controversies that defined the British Aesthetic Movement. Chapter 4, “Beautiful Graffiti: Vernon Lee, Wilhelm Dilthey, and the Democratization of Art” analyzes Lee’s and Dilthey’s parallel efforts to envision an aesthetic polity in which a perceptual *sensus communis* is forged and managed by the secret shaping hands of an artistic aristocracy. Chapter 5, “Unchained Harmony: Walter Pater’s Ethics of Influence,” argues that Pater’s writings after *The Renaissance* attempt to accommodate the ethical imperatives of common sense without sacrificing the teeming, unique sensory details that escape the perceptual norms guiding common sense experience.

“Uncommon Sense” thus demonstrates the crucial role of cognitive science in late Victorian literature and culture, arguing for renewed attention to the ongoing dialogues between literature and science that promise the enrichment of both.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

David Sweeney Coombs was born and grew up in Alabama. He graduated with a B.A. in English from Indiana University in Bloomington. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in English Language and Literature at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

For Angela, and for my family

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The impotence of speculative reason, as Kant has demonstrated it, is perhaps at bottom only the impotence of an intellect enslaved to the necessities of bodily life and concerned with a matter which man has had to disorganize for the satisfaction of his wants. Our knowledge of things would thus no longer be relative to the fundamental structure of our mind, but only to its superficial and acquired habits, to the contingent form which it derives from our bodily functions and from our lower needs. The relativity of knowledge may not, then, be definitive. By unmaking that which these needs have made, we may restore to intuition its original purity and so recover contact with the real.

—Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*

On October 18th, 1902, the Berlin newspaper *Der Tag* published a short story encapsulating the epistemological conflict that had animated European debates over the politics of aesthetics for the previous three decades. Written by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the *wunderkind* of the Young Vienna group, and titled simply “A Letter,” the story consists of an epistle from a fictional seventeenth-century poet, Lord Chandos, to one of the earliest Europeans to advocate scientific empiricism, Sir Francis Bacon.¹ In the letter, Chandos explains why, to the incomprehension of

¹ In English translation, the story is often titled “The Lord Chandos Letter.” Bacon is often erroneously described as “the Father of Empiricism” for his early advocacy for the scientific method. To give Bacon credit for founding empiricism, however, is to marginalize and ignore the much earlier iterations of the scientific method by Middle Eastern scientists, such as Ibn Al-Haythm, and perpetuate the racist ideologies of a European cultural parthenogenesis. Hence Bacon is more accurately described as one of the first Europeans to advocate scientific empiricism.

friends such as Bacon, he has given up writing and retired to semi-seclusion on his estate while still a young man. This social and literary paralysis has been brought on, he writes, by the progressive collapse of his relationship with language. Chandos describes how he gradually found himself unable to discuss general matters because “the abstract words which the tongue must enlist as a matter of course in order to bring out an opinion disintegrated in [his] mouth like rotten mushrooms.” He recounts his amazement when, while rebuking his daughter for telling a lie and trying to impress upon her the virtues of honesty, “the ideas flowing into [his] mouth suddenly took on such iridescent hues and merged into each other to such a degree that [he] had to make an effort to sputter to the end of [his] sentence, as if [he] had fallen ill” (121). This condition has progressed so far, Chandos writes, that when seeing the title of one of his own books, he “did not even perceive [the title] right away as a familiar image made of words strung together, but was able to understand it only by taking it one word at a time,” as if he had never seen this combination of words before (118).

Chandos’ crisis of language, his inability to understand or assent even to basic propositions (such as “this matter turned out well or badly” or “Sheriff N. is a bad person”), is in fact a crisis of perception.

Once I saw through a magnifying glass that an area of skin on my little finger looked like an open field with furrows and hollows. That was how it was for me now with people and their affairs. I could no longer grasp them with the simplifying gaze of habit. Everything came to pieces, the pieces broke into more pieces, and nothing could be encompassed by one idea. Isolated words swam about me; they turned into eyes that stared at me and into which I had to stare back, dizzying whirlpools which spun around and around and led into the void. (122)

What pitches Chandos into this void of perceptual disintegration is his loss of the “simplifying gaze of habit.” Habit, in this case, means much more than mere routine. Charged with a half-century of use by the new sciences of consciousness, habit here denotes the semiotic norms of perception that shape and organize sense experience. Having lost these habits of perception, Chandos finds himself overwhelmed by the great blooming, buzzing confusion of sensations unordered and unmediated by social norms. Consequently, he can neither write nor communicate his experiences to the people around him, for to do so requires assent to those social norms as the basis for communication in language.² The absence of habit’s simplifying gaze socially isolates Chandos and begins to dissolve his identity in an ecstatic, involuntary, and incommunicable chaos of sensations. Lord Chandos, in short, is condemned to wander alone among the vertiginous landscape of forces revealed by the emergence of cognitive science in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Confining Enlightenment

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, the grand vista of universal reason dreamt of in the Enlightenment was in the process of disintegrating into the cramped perspectives of particular, limited, and fragile ways of apprehending the world. In part, this disintegration resulted from the powerful challenges to Enlightenment thought presented by Romanticism in philosophy and the arts as well as the catastrophic collapse of French Revolutionary efforts to erect a state on universal rational principles into the bloodshed and mass executions of the Terror. Equally, however, the Enlightenment aspiration to the orderly explanation and description of

² I pass over here the irony that he communicates this condition quite precisely and poetically in the letter itself. As Kovach points out, Hofmannsthal slyly acknowledges this irony by having Chandos repeatedly declare that he can no longer write in Latin or English or Italian or Spanish while conspicuously leaving out German (Kovach 91).

the world through the application of universal reason began to be undermined by the nineteenth-century scientific studies that sought to realize those ambitions. By analyzing the dynamics of the body using new methods and techniques, these studies scientifically demonstrated the constraints of human sensory perception with unprecedented focus. In 1800, for example, Wilhelm Herschel discovered the existence of light outside the spectrum visible to human sight. There soon followed an explosion of experiments on sense organs and the nervous system in the wake of this revolutionary demonstration of heretofore unimagined limits in human sensory apprehension. In 1833, Johannes Müller began publishing his *Elements of Physiology*, which elaborated his theory of the law of specific nerve energies: the principle that different qualities of sensation result not from different types of stimuli but from the neural pathways through which a given stimulus is processed.³ In 1850, Müller's student, Hermann von Helmholtz, made the astonishing discovery that the nervous system does not process stimuli simultaneously; on average, Helmholtz revealed, nervous tissue transmits impulses at the surprisingly slow pace of about 100 miles per hour (Boden 107). Helmholtz followed up this discovery by devising the ophthalmoscope in order to make the first detailed examination of the inside of the retina. He found that the retina could be divided into two zones: a dense patchwork of photoreceptor cells grouped into the fovea—which processes a narrowly circumscribed area of a visual field into detailed, definitely colored images—and a much sparser set of cells grouped around the fovea—which produces our vague, washed-out but highly movement-sensitive peripheral vision. As Jonathan Crary observes, Helmholtz's discovery demolished classical perspective, suggesting that its conal-field of homogenous and stable clarity was in fact compounded of multiple,

³ So, for example, electricity applied to the optic nerve will produce a sensation of light even in the absence of visible light.

separate moments of vision, synthesized in the act of perception (290-1). Similarly, Helmholtz's next study, *On the Sensations of Tone*, revealed that most simple musical tones (with the exception of those produced by tuning forks) are in fact chords, composed of a fundamental tone and what Helmholtz called upper partials—supplementary tones at higher frequencies whose distribution produces the timbre that defines a particular tone, its tendency to sound like a harp or human voice. Taken together, these and similar studies revolutionized prevailing notions of sensation and perception. In place of the understandings of sense experience as relatively stable in the Enlightenment era, nineteenth-century neuroscience substituted a set of theories suggesting that sensory perception was capable of apprehending only a narrow range of the forces at work in the world; that it produced a given type of sensation irrespective of the type of stimuli that caused it; that it was not simultaneous but rather subject to a time-lag; and that it was composed of fragmentary, compound sensations synthesized by consciousness.

As the physics of perception confronted Victorian scientists with the vertiginous prospect of the mind's attenuated, contingent apprehension of the world, many of these scientists took up the task of what Crary calls "reality maintenance": the effort to account for the apparent predictability and coherence of sensory perception and consciousness (15). They did so by supplementing the physics of perception with a semiotics. Helmholtz, for example, was only one of the many Victorian scientists arguing that consciousness treats sensations as signs. According to Helmholtz's theory of "unconscious inferences," consciousness interprets sensations, unconsciously inferring whole objects or events from fragmentary sense data on the basis of the regularity of phenomena.⁴ Although the sense-data provided to

⁴ Helmholtz specifically argues that these sensory signs are not images—if their relation to their objective-referents is not quite arbitrary, they are also emphatically non-mimetic. Mimesis would imply

consciousness are always partial and contingent, Helmholtz argues that the semiotics of perception enables us to obtain stable knowledge of the world. Thus, he writes in “The Facts in Perception” that “even though our sensations are, in their quality, only signs whose special type depends completely on our organization, they are nonetheless not to be dismissed as empty appearance; rather, they are precisely signs of something, be it something that is enduring or occurring, and, what is most important, they can delineate for us the law of this occurring” (348).

More generally, Victorian scientists evolved semiotics of perception very similar to Helmholtz’ unconscious inferences by adapting the psychology of association. The psychology of association—in which one conceives of objects and events by bundling similar or contiguously experienced sensations together—had been especially predominant in British studies of consciousness since David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* appeared in 1749. Victorian associationism, however, differed from earlier models of association in two important respects. First, while Hume had suggested in passing that the principle of association is at work in signification, Victorian associationists much more explicitly and emphatically conceived of association as a semiotics of perception (Hume 64-5). C.S. Peirce, who evolved his argument that all thought proceeds by signs in reference to Victorian theories of semiotic perception, illustrates this shift nicely in “Some Consequences of the Four Incapacities.”

The association of ideas is said to proceed according to three principles—those of resemblance, of contiguity, and of causality. But it would be equally true to say that signs denote what they do on the three principles of resemblance, contiguity, and causality. There can be no question that anything *is* a sign of

that the world they signify can be apprehended in and by itself, whereas we can only know the world through the signs provided by our senses. See *Science and Culture* 347.

whatever is associated with it by resemblance, by contiguity, or by causality.

(80, emphasis his)

The second important difference between Victorian associationism and its earlier iterations concerns the nature of sensation. Despite their interest in the volatility of relations *between* sensations, eighteenth- and even early nineteenth-century associationists (such as James Mill) assumed that sensations themselves were stable and more or less given. After the explosion of neuroscientific research in the middle of the nineteenth century, such assumptions were no longer tenable. Consequently, Victorian associationists typically characterized sensations as volatile, contingent, and *constructed*. Drawing from physiological theories that built on Müller's law of specific nerve energies, Victorian associationists held that sensations were the product of neural habits—pathways engraved in the nervous system by repeated experiences. These pathways, they claimed, constituted the physical basis of association: as a stimulus passed through a particular neural path and became sensation, it excited the adjacent pathways that had been created by the stimuli habitually experienced together with the present stimulus (see, for example, Carpenter 343-5 and James 563). Victorian associationists thus conceived of neural pathways as guiding sensory perception on the basis of past experience. This marriage of association psychology with neuroscience proved extremely influential and deeply attractive for its capacity to reconcile the insights of neuroscience with an account of sensory perception as much more stable and predictable than the new physiology initially suggested.

In this way, the crisis of perception initiated by the revelations of neuroscience led to the emergence of a scientific psychology. In addition to the reappraisal and adaptation of association in light of Victorian physiology, the efforts to account for the apparent stability of human sense experience despite its complexity and contingency became the chief problem of the new field of experimental psychology. Wilhelm

Wundt, one of Helmholtz's students and the founder, in 1879, of one of the first two experimental psychology laboratories (the other was founded the same year by William James), devoted the bulk of his research to this effort. Wundt held that the psychology of association insufficiently explained the dynamics of sensory perception. While association was an important element in perception, he argued, to identify it with perception is to assign too large a role to memory: in association, an isolated sensation launches a train of memories, and these memories effectively interpret the sensation into an objective cause. Association therefore cannot explain how consciousness negotiates a complex sensory field by *combining present sensations* into unified perceptions.⁵ Wundt terms this synthesis apperception. Nevertheless, Wundt's apperception bears broad similarities to both Victorian associationism and Helmholtz's theory of unconscious inference. Like unconscious inference and association, Wundt's apperception is a mode of filling out or interpreting contingently apprehended stimuli, a perceptual semiotics.

This dissertation argues that the birth and development of neuroscience and experimental psychology in the latter half of the nineteenth century constitute the emergence of cognitive science. In dating the origins of cognitive science to the latter half of the nineteenth century, I am at odds with prevailing histories of the field that locate the beginnings of cognitive science in the late 1930s and early 1940s or later. There are two primary arguments supporting this later date. First, historians argue that cognitive science only begins when explanatory paradigms from cybernetics and computer science are applied to the study of the mind. Margaret Boden's magisterial history of the field thus defines cognitive science as the interdisciplinary study of "mind as machine," but she glosses machine as, in effect, the computer (9). Modeling

⁵ See *An Introduction to Psychology* 80-2. Wundt's main target is the older version of associationism, but his criticisms encompass its Victorian iteration as well.

the study of mind on AI and control theory allows cognitive scientists to conceptualize consciousness as a complex set of interrelated mechanisms constantly engaged in establishing a form of dynamic equilibrium with that consciousness' environment. Although Victorian scientists did conceive of consciousness as following mechanical laws—to the shock and dismay of many of their contemporaries—the models and concepts provided by twentieth-century computer science were unimaginable to them.⁶ The form of mechanical explanation to which most Victorian scientists subscribed was drawn from Newtonian physics, whose simpler, more straightforwardly linear models of cause and effect limited their efforts to understand and explain the complex economy of faculties, forces, and feedback at work in cognition. Put another way, the steam engine could not offer suggestive analogies for the mind in the way that a computer can; Victorian machines were just not complicated enough. Hence, Boden paradoxically claims that Victorian science conceived of “psychology as mechanism—but not as machine” (123).

The second reason that the beginnings of cognitive science are typically dated to the mid-twentieth century hinges on what is probably the most dramatic moment in the history of the field: Chomsky's review of B.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*. Chomsky's stinging, often hilarious exposure of the fallacies and amphibolies in Skinner's book doubled as a devastating critique of behaviorism. “One would

⁶ Most, but not all, Victorian neuroscientists and experimental psychologists held that consciousness is determined by mechanical processes. When, for example, Helmholtz and three other students declared their intentions to attempt the explanation of all living processes as products of physical laws, Müller refused to endorse this scandalous project. James remained agnostic on this point, and Bergson's *Matter and Memory* relentlessly attacks purely mechanistic psychology. Publicly advocating the mechanistic theory of mind could even be seen as politically dangerous. Hence, when Ivan Sechenov called for a psychology based on physics in his 1868 essay, “The Reflexes of the Brain,” Tsarist censors deemed the essay subversive and refused to allow its republication in the widely read, non-specialist journal, *Sovremennik* (see Roger Smith 94-112). By the latter part of the century, however, many scientists had become unabashed mechanists. T. H. Huxley and William Kingdon Clifford, for example, argued not only that consciousness is subject to physical laws, but, notoriously, that consciousness itself is merely an accidental by-product of physical processes, an epiphenomenon. See Huxley 199-250 and “Right and Wrong: The Scientific Grounds of Their Distinction” 300-339.

naturally expect,” he wrote, “that prediction of the behavior of a complex organism (or machine) would require, in addition to information about external stimulation, knowledge of the internal structure of the organism, the ways in which it processes input information and organizes its own behavior. These characteristics of the organism are in general a complicated product of inborn structure, the genetically determined course of maturation, and past experience” (Chomsky 49). Behaviorism’s narrow focus on stimulus and response, Chomsky argued, paid far too little attention to the role of the organism’s innate structure, and consequently, its representation of the human mind was nothing less than a grotesque caricature.⁷ These charges helped form cognitive scientists’ sense of their field; this self-definition, therefore, incorporated the idea of a sharp break with behaviorist psychology. Victorian neuroscience and scientific psychology—with their emphasis on the role played by habit in both sensory perception and language and their fascination with the power of environments to shape consciousness—laid the groundwork for the rise of behaviorism, which quickly came to dominate psychology in the first half of the twentieth century, at least within the United States. Since the Victorian sciences of mind thus contributed to behaviorism, and also since behaviorism intervened between late nineteenth-century experimental psychology and twentieth-century cognitive psychology, a consensus emerged that cognitive science only comes into existence as a field of study in the middle of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, Victorian neuroscience and psychology constitute the first systematic and experiment-driven attempts to study cognition scientifically in Europe and the United States. If cybernetics and AI were still well beyond the horizon, three

⁷ Behaviorists maintained that innate structure simply could not be studied satisfactorily given the limited technologies of observation available. Chomsky held that innate structure could be induced without comprehensive knowledge of that structure’s neurophysiological foundations, as in his theory of generative grammar.

of the seven core disciplines in cognitive science—experimental psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience—were already in place.⁸ Moreover, these disciplines' analyses tacitly suggested that a full account of cognition would require attention to the effects of language and culture; Victorian sciences of mind thus anticipated the inclusion of linguistics and anthropology as the remaining two core disciplines in twentieth-century cognitive science. Further, if their physics remained broadly Newtonian, not all Victorian scientists conceived of cognition in the atomized, simple-cause-and-effect terms of eighteenth-century associationism. Wundt, we have seen, criticized associationism on just those grounds. As I argue in more detail in chapters 3-5, many Victorian writers and scientists conceived of sensory-perception as a dynamic process of exchange and transformation in ways that look forward to the feedback loops of twentieth-century control theory. Indeed, Bergson, attacking the associationist figure of the train of thought, urged that the act of perception should be understood as a circuit (*Matter and Memory* 104). Additionally, while Victorian neuroscientific psychology did evolve into behaviorism in the United States, it paid far more attention to innate structure. While the emphasis on neural habits seemed to accord an enormous shaping power to environment and experience, these habits were also held to be inheritable, as I explain below. In that sense, Victorian scientists understood neural habits as both the product of individual experience and an innate structure shaping that experience. If the Victorian sciences of mind are not, strictly speaking, identical to modern cognitive science, they defined some of the basic parameters of the field; modern cognitive science is unthinkable without them. I therefore use the term Victorian cognitive science throughout this dissertation.

⁸ Philosophy played a large role in Victorian neuroscience and psychology, before disciplinary boundaries began to harden under the pressure of the increasing professionalization of scientific and academic work. Many neuroscientists and psychologists, such as Helmholtz and G.H. Lewes, saw their scientific work as a form of philosophy. Wundt and James both held positions as professors of philosophy while working in psychology.

In many ways, Victorian cognitive science could be described as the scientific continuation of Kant's philosophical project in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's epistemological gambit—to preserve the validity of science and Reason by ceding the unknowability of a noumenal realm of things-in-themselves in order to elaborate the rules structuring the phenomenal realm of human perception—paid off substantially in the nineteenth century, as neuroscience appeared to scientifically confirm just this distinction. Many Victorian scientists saw their own projects as Kantian, or at least as building on Kantian arguments. Helmholtz understood his and Müller's scientific research as “the empirical exposition of the theoretical discussion of Kant on the nature of the intellectual process of the human mind” (*Handbuch der Physiologischen Optik* 249, quoted in Boden 98). There were, however, important differences between Kant's idealist philosophical project and this empirical exposition. For Kant, sensory perception takes place in three stages of synthesis. First, the synthesis of apprehension in intuition differentiates a perceptual field, fixing manifolds in time and space. Then, the synthesis of reproduction in imagination organizes the manifold into an image and brings it into a tacit, unreflective relation to previous, associated images. Finally, the synthesis of recognition applies a concept to the image, thus formalizing its relation to its associates and cognizing it. These three stages of synthesis form the basis of what Kant calls the transcendental unity of apperception—the synthesis of appearances into one common experience according to universal laws by a unified consciousness. As Victorian neuroscience began to examine perception empirically, it at once confirmed the bulk of Kant's account of perception and subjected it to an important transformation. The theory of neural habits that evolved from Müller's law of specific nerve energy collapsed the three levels of synthesis in Kantian perception. In this theory, as neural pathways process stimuli, they simultaneously differentiate a sensory field, organize the stimuli into sensations, revive the neural memory of those

sensations' associates, and interpret them into something like unified concepts. Helmholtz suggests in "The Facts in Perception" that the resolution of Kant's *a priori* conditions of perception into identified and analyzed physical processes constituted the most important advance in nineteenth-century neuroscience. As Helmholtz rightly discerns, however, this scientific advance radically undermined the transcendental unity of apperception and Kantian metaphysics ("The Facts in Perception" 364).

In effect, neuroscientific psychology demolished Kantian claims that there exists a universal form of perceptual experience. By resolving Kant's *a priori* conditions of perception into localized neural pathways created by experience, Victorian neuroscience implied that many aspects of perception are not universal but contingent and relative. Kant himself recognized just this danger in defining the conditions of perception as the product of experience rather than as necessarily pre-existing it.

Unity of synthesis in accordance with empirical concepts would be entirely contingent, and were it not grounded on a transcendental ground of unity, it would be possible for a swarm of appearances to fill up our soul without experience ever being able to arise from it. But in that case all relation of cognition to objects would also disappear, since the appearances would lack connection in accordance with universal and necessary laws, and would thus be intuition without thought, but never cognition, and would therefore be as good as nothing for us (*Critique of Pure Reason* 234).

To open up the forms of perception to being defined by experience, Kant saw, would be to subject both perception and subjectivity to perpetual, protean redefinition. In Kant's swarm of appearances, one can glimpse the void of Lord Chandos' madness lying in wait.

In order to ward off the threat of cognitive incoherence—which became omnipresent for more than just theoretical reasons as nineteenth-century Europe was remade by industrial modernity—Victorian neuroscientific psychologists stressed the foundation of neural pathways in habits. Repeated actions and feelings were understood to reshape the nervous system in a way that cemented those actions and feelings as dispositions to respond to stimuli in a certain way unreflectively. Conceiving of habits as both the source and outcome of neural processes allowed Victorian scientists to frame neural pathways as a sort of neural *bildung* in line with Aristotelian ethics. Again and again, Victorian psychologists urged that neuroscience confirmed the need to inculcate strong habits as a central ethical duty and educational mission. “The great thing, then, in all education,” wrote William James, “*is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy...For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague*” (James 122, emphasis his).⁹ More importantly, however, Victorian psychologists, drawing from Lamarckian models of “soft inheritance,” also claimed that neural habits were passed on from one generation to the next (Carpenter 342). This claim suggested that the experiences of one’s forebears determined a vast portion of mental life. “All sensations, perceptions, emotions, volitions,” wrote G.H. Lewes, “are partly connate, partly acquired; partly the evolved products of the accumulated experiences of ancestors, and partly of the accumulated experiences of the individual, when each of these have left *residua* in the modifications of the [nervous] structure” (*Problems of Life and Mind* 111). Many Victorian writers and critics, eager to posit a foundation for the cultural coherence of European nations, seized on this claim that neural pathways are inheritable. Walter Bagehot, for example, saw “the transmitted

⁹ Compare Wundt’s *Introduction to Psychology* 147.

nerve element” as “the ‘connective tissue’ of civilization...the continuous force which binds age to age” (*Physics and Politics* 8). This transmitted nerve element thus substituted for Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, serving as the theoretical foundation for a shared sense of reality, even if that sense was only shared amongst a particular class, national, or racial group. In effect, Victorian scientists and writers enlisted neural habits as a circumscribed *sensus communis*.

The Politics of Cognitive Aesthetics

The neuroscientific theory of *sensus communis* radically redefined the politics of aesthetics in the late Victorian period. Aesthetics in the nineteenth-century was already understood to play an indispensable role in the functioning of the modern liberal state precisely because of its capacity to strengthen and develop common sense as well as individual subjectivity. In *Culture and the State*, Lloyd and Thomas trace the definitive emergence of this role back to Kant.

For Kant, common sense, as the universal substrate of human reason, is the foundation equally of the aesthetic and the public sphere. For this reason, aesthetic judgments, which both develop in themselves as taste develops and ground the ethical disinterest of the public sphere, constitute a kind of precursor to any possible politics, insofar as any social contract which will assume the participation of autonomous...citizens demands equally their prior ethical formation. (5)

Schiller built on these often tacit arguments in Kantian aesthetic theory to articulate the first formal manifesto of the arts’ ethico-political mission—to reaffirm full subjectivity and common sense in the face of the social and psychic fragmentation resulting from modernity by providing citizens with an aesthetic education. In the

wake of the Hyde Park riots and the Second Reform Bill, Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* infused this mission with new urgency for Victorian culture, invoking the power of aesthetic culture to resist the accelerating atomization of British society by binding Britons together into a state reflecting their best selves.

As Linda Dowling has demonstrated, however, the nineteenth-century understandings of aesthetic education and the political crises it supposedly mitigates rehearse the earlier epistemological dilemma at the origins of the liberal state in Britain. According to Dowling, Locke's argument in the *Essay* that consciousness begins as a *tabula rasa*, awaiting the inscriptions of experience, constituted the epistemological concomitant of the foundational democratic principle of *isonomia*—the proposition that all men are created equal and therefore are equal before the law. While Lockean epistemology thus provided crucial support for Whig governance after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, it also suggested that all social values are contingent, merely a matter of whatever happens to be inscribed on a particular mind's blank slate. "According to Mr. Locke," the Earl of Shaftesbury complained in a letter, virtue has "no other measure, law, or rule than fashion and custom... And thus neither right nor wrong, virtue nor vice, are anything in themselves; nor is there any trace or idea of them naturally imprinted on human minds. Experience and our catechism teach us all!" (Shaftesbury 404). While Locke's account of consciousness was necessary to the emerging liberal state in Britain, it thus also appeared to unmoor that state from any traditions or values that might provide it with an enduring moral justification. As Dowling explains, Shaftesbury attempted to resolve this dilemma by evolving a theory of a moral-aesthetic *sensus communis*—a set of innate moral feelings allowing us to make ethical judgments with all the immediacy of aesthetic response. Shaftesbury's theory of a moral-aesthetic sense, later taken up by Kant and Schiller and thence passed on to Victorian critics, became the implicit basis of what Dowling calls

aesthetic democracy—the complex set of nineteenth-century discourses and institutions founded on belief in the egalitarianism of taste and the efficacy of aesthetic education as a means of social reform (see Dowling 1-24).

The emergence of Victorian cognitive science transformed the underlying epistemological ground of aesthetic democracy. Neuroscience convincingly demonstrated that sensory experience was neither immediate nor universal. Neuroscientists also claimed, however, that we do enter the world with some ideas “naturally imprinted” on our minds. G.H. Lewes, for example, held that, because of the neural pathways we inherit from our forebears, Locke was wrong to claim that consciousness begins as a blank slate.

The sensitive mechanism is not a simple mechanism, and as such constant, but a variable mechanism, which has a *history*. What the senses inscribe on it, are not merely the changes of the external world, but these characters are commingled with those of preceding inscriptions. The sensitive subject is no *tabula rasa*. It is not a blank sheet of paper but a palimpsest.” (*Problems of Life and Mind* 149, emphasis in original)

Victorian arguments that the mind is a palimpsest rather than a *tabula rasa* seemed to resolve Shaftesbury’s dilemma. If consciousness is a palimpsest, social values—common ways of apprehending and judging the world—are not the mere contingent product of individual experience but are in fact inscribed in the mind as neural pathways with which we begin life and which can never be entirely effaced. Victorian neuroscience thus appeared to confirm Shaftesbury’s theory of a moral-aesthetic sense held in common. Equally, however, it demolished the universality of the moral-aesthetic sense. If, as Lewes suggests, our sensory faculties are not constant but variable, if they have a history, then any moral-aesthetic common sense is conventional, a product of culture rather than its ground.

Victorian cognitive science thus shaped nineteenth-century understandings of culture, in the sense of both the sphere and mission of the arts and the set of practices that define a given society or social group. The theory of neural pathways suggested that sensory phenomena vary according to the arrangement of nervous channels that process stimuli. Therefore, members of different groups, whose neural habits have resulted from different experiences and inherited pathways, actually experience the world in different ways. Neural pathways were thus thought to define a community on the basis of common sensory responses and norms of perception that are re-shaped over time; in effect, Victorian cognitive scientists provided the foundation for a cognitive theory of culture.¹⁰ In *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams invokes very similar theories in order to argue for a more expansive definition of culture as encompassing sensory-perceptions, which are not given but *constructed*.

The central fact of this new account of the activity of our brains is that each one of us *has to learn to see*... There is no reality of familiar shapes, colours, and sounds, to which we merely open our eyes. The information that we receive through our senses from the material world around us has to be interpreted, according to certain human rules, before what we ordinarily call 'reality' forms... The evolution of the human brain, and then the particular interpretations carried by particular cultures, give us certain 'rules' or 'models,' without which no human being can 'see' in the ordinary sense at all. In each individual, the learning of these rules, through inheritance and culture, is a kind of creation, in that the distinctively human world, the ordinary 'reality' that his culture defines, forms only as the rules are learned. Particular cultures carry particular versions of reality, which they can be said to create, in

¹⁰ In defining culture in this way, Victorian cognitive science likewise participated in the pernicious efforts underway in race science to theorize racial difference in the name of white supremacy. Chapter 2 deals with this overlap between Victorian cognitive and race sciences in more detail.

the sense that cultures carrying different rules (though on a common basis of the evolved human brain) create their own worlds which their bearers ordinarily experience. (34, emphasis in original)

Although Williams writes that these conclusions follow from “new” accounts of brain activity in 1961, the scientific claims he draws from and the conclusions about culture that follow are already fully developed in late Victorian cognitive science and literature. All of the writers that I examine in this dissertation anticipate Williams’ understanding of culture as a shaping force at work in fundamental cognitive and sensory processes, and they likewise recognized that this common sense had to be made.

The relentless transformations of industrial modernity in nineteenth-century Europe—the explosive growth of cities and a deracinated laboring class; the intensification of imperialist colonization in the search for markets and raw materials; the expansion of voting rights and political liberalism; the increasing commodification of objects and relationships; the emergence of mass literacy and mass culture—rendered this recognition that common sense must be made particularly acute and anxious in the late Victorian period. “Today,” Wilhelm Dilthey intoned gloomily in 1887, “a colorful mixture of forms from all periods and peoples is breaking in upon us and seems to undo every delimitation of literary genres and every rule...In this anarchy, the artist is forsaken by rules; the critic is thrown back upon his personal feeling as the only remaining standard of evaluation. The public rules. The masses throng into colossal exhibition halls, theaters of all shapes and sizes, and lending libraries...Thus today art is becoming democratic, like everything else around us” (“The Imagination of the Poet” 31-2). Dilthey, along with all the other late Victorian writers and critics in this study, was keenly aware that aesthetic judgments are not universal; that they are instead shaped by environment and inheritance; and that the

differential operation of these forces in any given society gives rise to different and competing aesthetic standards of evaluation, to different forms of common sense. Late Victorian writers on aesthetics thus anticipate one of the central arguments in Pierre Bourdieu's critique of Kantian aesthetic judgment—that aesthetic judgments are determined by and in turn reinforce prevailing social hierarchies. Indeed, the Victorian focus on neural habits as the determining factors in aesthetic judgments uncannily prefigures Bourdieu's use of the concept of "habitus"—the "categories of perception and appreciation...produced by an observable social condition" that mold and determine aesthetic experience (101). As the pervasive calls for aesthetic education in the late Victorian period attest, however, most Victorian writers and critics were profoundly disturbed by the fragmentation of common sense and by the social divisions this absence of cohesion reflected. Molding the neural habits of the public thus became a central preoccupation in late Victorian literature.

Late Victorian attempts at such cognitive-aesthetic education inevitably exacerbated one of the founding tensions in modern European aesthetic theory—that between beauty and freedom. While the writers in this dissertation, like Shaftesbury himself, saw a stable *sensus communis* as bolstering the liberal democratic state, they also—often explicitly—elevated artists into something like an aristocracy, invested with the power to discreetly manage the cognitive-sensory bedrock of the polis. At such moments, late Victorian writers seem to conceive of aesthetic democracy as built on just the kind of insidious indoctrination that Terry Eagleton charges has always been a central mission in aesthetic theory under liberal, capitalist modernity (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 20). If late Victorian writers invested themselves with such a *noblesse oblige* to mold the public's moral-aesthetic sense, at the same time, they saw that common sense as radically constraining their own agency and sensory experience, since artists and critics could no more exempt themselves from habits of perception

than could the public at large. The cognitive common sense envisaged by late Victorian writers limited agency and experience in two ways inconceivable within earlier aesthetic theory. First, the belief that common sense inhered in habit, rather than in simply given, universal human faculties, suggested that aesthetic response bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the mechanical rhythms and routinization of alienated industrial labor. This resemblance became especially troubling insofar as post-Romantic critics in the nineteenth-century from Ruskin to Bergson defined the beautiful and other forms of “true” experience *against* such alienated, routinized labor. More importantly, as Victorian cognitive science redefined Shaftesbury’s universal moral-aesthetic sense as the contingent set of cultural norms of perception inscribed in consciousness, the ways of apprehending and interpreting the world making up this common sense were robbed of their inevitability. Common sense became something that one could imagine as other than it was.

Cognitive science thus suggested to Victorian writers that there were other ways of experiencing the world, that other people might have access to a form of sensory experience utterly different from one’s own, and that one could, with the proper care, open up one’s own senses to such different forms of experience. Indeed, if people outside one’s own social background did experience the world differently, then opening up one’s senses might even be an ethical duty with a claim equal to that of participating in the *sensus communis* defining one’s immediate social environment. No Victorian writer grasped these implications better than Walter Pater. Pater, in the infamous conclusion to *The Renaissance*, argued that perceptual habits cause one to pass over the radical uniqueness of each moment of sensory experience and therefore declared that forming habits of perception amounted to a failure to grasp the aesthetic richness of life. After his scandalized contemporaries charged that his aesthetic philosophy undermined the basis of ethics in habits and common sense, Pater,

defending his aesthetic program in *Marius the Epicurean*, appealed to the moral value of attending to other ways of experiencing the world; any prevailing common aesthetic standard, his protagonist Marius reflects, might be “but one form of poetic beauty...but one voice, in a world where there were many voices it would be a moral weakness not to listen to” (49). Pater was not the only late Victorian to glimpse the fascinating possibility of a sensory experience outside the constraints of normative habits. In my epigraph from *Matter and Memory*, for example, Bergson gives rein to a daring speculation that by evading or transcending those habits, we might be able to leap over the phenomenal world of appearances and apprehend the noumenal realm of things-in-themselves. While they do not go as far as Bergson and Pater, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Vernon Lee all envision similar possibilities of what this dissertation calls the negative liberty of perception.¹¹ All of these writers also recognized, however, that to completely unmoor consciousness from the perceptual habits of common sense would be to give oneself over to a bewildering tumult of sensations that would become Lord Chandos’ madness in 1902.

Consequently, late Victorian aesthetic theory, as it wrestles with the theories and findings of cognitive science, is characterized by two contradictory efforts—to participate in and mold common sense as the foundation of an aesthetic democracy and to assert the negative liberty of perception. I argue that without attention to these contradictory efforts, we cannot fully account for several of the most important literary texts, events, and movements of the late Victorian period, including *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot’s aesthetics of sympathy and her late turn to Zionism; *The Return of the*

¹¹ The late Victorian fascination with perceptual negative liberty derives in part from similar efforts in literary Romanticism to imagine a capacity for enriched perception. Wordsworth, for example, writes in “Tintern Abbey” of “all the mighty world/ Of Eye and ear, both what they half-create./ And what perceive” (134). For Wordsworth, however, there remains a clear distinction between perception itself and the act of creation that transforms it by charging it with significance. Victorian cognitive science rendered such a distinction meaningless—it convincingly demonstrated that all acts of perception, even those remaining within the norms of common sense, entail such creative mental supplementation.

Native and Thomas Hardy's decision to stop writing novels after the scandals occasioned by his work in the 1890s; and, above all, the Aesthetic Movement, especially the outrage that greeted Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* and his response in *Marius the Epicurean*. In addition, I suggest that an analysis of this tension in the politics of aesthetics in the late Victorian period meaningfully contributes to recent critical efforts to reassess the dynamics and legacy of liberalism in Victorian literature and culture. One of the central concerns in these efforts has been the Victorian concept of detachment—a form of agency that aspires to the transcendence or bracketing of a purely subjective or culturally determined perspective on the world in the service of criticism and reflection—and the ways in which critical detachment must always remain partly within the horizons of common institutions and forms of communication (see Anderson and Thomas). By analyzing the tension between the negative liberty of perception and the imperatives of common sense in late Victorian understandings of aesthetic democracy, this study aims to provide a thickly described case study of liberalism and detachment in Victorian culture.

Chapters 2 and 3 are case studies of how cognitive science shapes the aesthetic theories governing two major late Victorian novels. Chapter 2, "Raising National Unconsciousness: Neural Writing and Sympathy in *Daniel Deronda*," reads George Eliot's ethic of sympathy as an attempt to resolve this conflict. As she elaborates her concept of sympathy in her early novels, Eliot employs a trope of neural writing, where the meaning of a representation of another's experience is "printed in the subtle fibers of our nerves." More than just a simple appeal to empiricism, Eliot's trope refers to G. H. Lewes' claims that consciousness is a palimpsest of neural channels inscribed in the body by individual and ancestral experiences. While these neural habits delimit and determine cognitions and sensations, Eliot suggests that consciousness can be rewritten by sympathy, which reflectively reinterprets—and

thereby reshapes—experience. Eliot therefore makes the expansion of her readers' sympathy the primary aesthetic goal and ethical justification of her early novels. However, in the wake of the Second Reform Bill and the collapse of the first Gladstone ministry, Eliot came to believe that sympathy too easily altered the mind, eroding the foundations of culture and deliberate social and moral action. Consequently, Eliot's final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, seeks to ground sympathy in a racial community defined by common neural traits inscribed deeply enough to withstand diaspora. In striving to render neural habits less alterable, however, Eliot finds herself widening the psychic split between cognitive norms and volitional awareness, leading to the novel's various forms of double consciousness.

While sympathy initially makes possible the negative liberty of perception for Eliot, sympathy is made impossible for the negative liberty of perception as Thomas Hardy envisions it. Chapter 3, "Reading in the Dark: Sensory Perception and Agency in *The Return of the Native*," argues that Hardy's novel draws from Victorian experimental psychology to elaborate a theory of what Hardy calls the beauty of association. As opposed to the beauty of form, Hardy claims, the beauty of association accommodates the communal aesthetic values that spring from long-established traditions of social life. However, Hardy's novel also identifies associative perception as a means of transfiguring conventional perceptions—an act of aesthetically re-envisioning accepted reality that, according to Hardy, distinguishes his own novels from "realism." Associative perception in Hardy's novel thus widens the rift between the heath's "natives"—who unreflectively respond to sensations in accord with long-established associations—and the more worldly figures, such as Clym Yeobright and Eustacia—who press association into the service of perceptual agency and autonomy. Moreover, Hardy's novel registers a deep anxiety that, while associative perception makes authorship possible for him, it also enables his readers to

transfigure his texts regardless of his intended meanings. I argue that these concerns shape Hardy's subsequent reactions to the critical and public uproar over *Tess* and *Jude* in the 1890s, and influence his decision to stop writing novels.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the role of cognitive science in the theories, debates, and controversies that defined the British Aesthetic Movement. Chapter 4, "Beautiful Graffiti: Vernon Lee, Wilhelm Dilthey, and the Democratization of Art," argues that Lee and Dilthey undertake parallel efforts in the 1880s to elaborate a neuroscientific theory of aesthetic response. Lee's *Belcaro* and *Juvenilia* and Dilthey's "The Imagination of the Poet" seek to contain chaotic, solipsistic forms of perception—which they associate with modernization and mass culture—that, in the manner of graffiti, write-over art objects with private perceptual interpretations in defiance of common sense and artistic intention alike. In opposition to these acts of aesthetic vandalism, Lee and Dilthey envision an aesthetic polity in which a stable *sensus communis* is forged and managed by the secret shaping hands of an artistic aristocracy, under whose tutelage the public receives an aesthetic education in common norms of feeling and perception without being aware of it. In Lee's essays, however, this vision of an aesthetic managed society is in tension with an alternative valorization of aesthetic graffiti as a means of resisting or deflecting the perceptual influence of artworks and thus retaining aesthetic autonomy and privacy.

Chapter 5, "Unchained Harmony: Walter Pater's Ethics of Influence," argues that the public controversy incited by *The Renaissance* stemmed from that text's apparent advocacy of an absolute negative liberty of perception, without reference to ethical norms or social repercussions. Pater's declaration that habit merely limits experience and is therefore a kind of failure in life shocked the broad Victorian consensus that perceptual habits formed the basis of shared moral and aesthetic values. Consequently, in "The School of Giorgione," "The Child in the House," and *Marius*

the Epicurean, Pater attempts to accommodate the ethical imperatives of common sense without sacrificing the aesthete's commitment to give himself over to all the teeming, unique sensory details that escape the perceptual norms guiding common sense experience. He does so, I argue, by drawing from neuroscientific studies of music and sound to develop a model of perceptual synthesis based on harmony, in which one spontaneously brings a particular sense experience into relation with common representations of that experience while also maintaining an awareness of its concretely distinct features.

“Uncommon Sense” thus demonstrates the crucial role of cognitive science in late Victorian literature and culture, arguing for renewed attention to the ongoing dialogues between literature and science that promise the enrichment of both.

CHAPTER 2
RAISING NATIONAL UNCONSCIOUSNESS:
NEURAL WRITING AND SYMPATHY IN *DANIEL DERONDA*

According to George Eliot, what elevates humanity above the narrow egotism of the “brutes” is the “sense of a corporate existence,” the modern form of which is national consciousness. This sense of collective identity, she writes in “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!,” is a “humanizing, elevating habit of mind” that inspires sacrifices of self-centered ends for the sake of “spiritual ends, ends which consist not in immediate material possession, but in the satisfaction of a great feeling that animates the collective body as with one soul...It is this living force of sentiment in common which makes a national consciousness” (144, 156, 146-7). The feeling of national belonging, Eliot suggests, is both the end of national consciousness—the object for which we make sacrifices—and the means by which national consciousness is made—what enables us to discern that there is something besides immediate gratification for us to set as our end in the first place. At the same time, the choice of ends at the heart of national consciousness seems to depend on acts below the threshold of reflective volition: feelings and habits. In fact, the relationship between national feeling and humanity in general here curiously echoes passages elsewhere in Eliot’s work that focus specifically on children and their affective relationships with the landscapes in which they grow up, affective relationships that are forged without “the labour of choice” (*The Mill on the Floss* 151). Eliot’s “humanizing, elevating habit of mind” here recalls the famous passage in *Daniel Deronda* in which the narrator contends that a human life “should be well rooted in some spot of native land...a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by

sentimental effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood” (22). Our “habit of mind” is of course a step up from the child’s “sweet habit of the blood,” but Eliot’s suggestion that national consciousness is constituted by a “habit,” an act that straddles the line between being conscious and being unconscious, raises the question of whether national consciousness is, in her thinking, properly conscious at all.

This tension in Eliot’s thought between a corporate identity based on a fully reflective volition and one based on semi-conscious feeling informs a broad swath of critical writing about the dynamics of collective belonging in Eliot’s work. In Suzanne Graver’s literary sociological analysis, for example, community has a contradictory status in Eliot’s work as at once fact—the object of empirico-scientific cognition—and value—an affectively held ideal, while for Terry Eagleton, George Eliot’s communities represent the uneasy conjunction of collectivist Romantic ideologies of rural organicism with the individualist ideologies of liberalism, scientific rationalism, and “incipient feminism” (*Criticism and Ideology* 111-3). Perhaps the most suggestive recent treatment of this tension is Amanda Anderson’s reading of *Daniel Deronda* as simultaneously both a sustained meditation on “the possibility and need for self-reflective and dialogical affirmations of cultural heritage” and an expression of “Eliot’s not fully relinquished dream of a reflective return to a kind of *prereflective* cultural embeddedness” that plays into ethnic nationalism, “the most dangerous doctrines of modern times” (138, 137). Anderson’s reading here reflects the broad consensus that Eliot’s work, like her life, is marked by a strain between, on the one hand, her cosmopolitan affiliations and her defiant liberation from conventionality, emblemized by her common-law marriage with G.H. Lewes, and, on the other hand, her nostalgic, “not fully relinquished dream” of a return to the rural English midlands community of her youth.

The tendentiousness of this distinction should by now be clear; it's rarely to celebrate Eliot's nostalgic feeling that critics distinguish between those feelings and her reflective distance. The nearly unanimous critical privileging of Eliot's emphasis on reflection over her emphasis on feeling stems from the vexed relation of feeling to consciousness and volition. For Graver, Eagleton, and Anderson, the feeling of collective belonging in Eliot can be naïve, mystified, or prereflective, but it is always insufficiently conscious. This critical position also reflects a preference for those aspects of Eliot's thought generally perceived as more progressive, not the least important of which is the premium she places on the act of subjective detachment that makes critical thinking possible in the first place.

In this respect, contemporary critics avail themselves of a rough opposition between reflection and feeling in mid-Victorian culture that coded reflection as a mode of reform that subjects traditions to criticism and feeling as a conservative impulse that preserves allegiance to tradition. The most famous expression of this idea is, of course, Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, which opposes Hellenism's "disinterested play of consciousness upon...stock notions and habits" to a conservative Hebraism comprised of man's "feeling and acting side" (165, 101). Eliot, like Arnold, sought to imagine an ideal balance of reflection and feeling as the basis for a vision of English political life that could accommodate itself to both reform and tradition. Nonetheless, in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot, perhaps more than Arnold, seems alive to the possibility that reflection and feeling, reform and tradition, might often prove incompatible. The impasse that results from this incompatibility is the predicament in which Daniel Deronda finds himself at the beginning of Eliot's last novel. Drifting through his twenties without having discovered a social duty to give his life direction, Deronda suffers from the complaint of social and moral paralysis

typical of the mid-Victorian liberal.¹² But Deronda's penchant for liberal reflection threatens him not just with a loss of virility, but also with a loss of sensibility itself: "His imagination had so wrought itself to the habit of seeing things as they probably appeared to others, that a strong partisanship...had become an insincerity for him. His plenteous, flexible sympathy had ended by falling into one current with that reflective analysis which tends to neutralize sympathy" (364). It is hard to imagine an aspect of reflective analysis that would be more troubling for Eliot than a tendency to neutralize sympathy, the basis of her ethics, the moral justification of her writing, and an essential element of the feeling of collective belonging. But if, as this passage implies, reflective analysis is also what enables Deronda to imagine how things probably appear to others, then it seems indistinguishable from sympathy. In fact, Eliot implies here and elsewhere that sympathy is a version of what might be termed critical feeling.

This chapter explores the dynamics of feeling and reflection in Eliot's work. I start by establishing the importance of Victorian physiology to Eliot's thinking about the relationship between feeling and thought. I argue that Eliot, especially in her early novels, constructs an ethic of sympathetic reflection by drawing from the neuroscientific theories of her husband, G.H. Lewes. In a brief reading of *The Mill on the Floss*, I suggest that Eliot's sympathetic reflection is influenced by Lewes' ideal of a "vigorous thinker," a figure who preserves her autonomy and the intensity of her feeling from the chaos of unregulated sensation, on the one hand, and the automation of thoroughly routinized feelings and acts on the other. I then move on to Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, in which sympathetic reflection has become a dangerously abstract and universalizing force that undermines, rather than preserves, feeling. I

¹² On this point and the threat to male virility perceived in the mid-Victorian liberal ideal of many-sidedness, see Thomas, 8-14. Deronda's predicament also seems to rehearse Mill's personal crisis, brought on by reflective analysis' "tendency to wear away the feelings, as he describes it in his autobiography (137).

argue that, in response to Eliot's fears that England had become dangerously unmoored from its traditions in the wake of the Second Reform Bill and the collapse of the first Gladstone ministry, *Deronda* embraces a neuroscientific model of racial inheritance in an effort to salvage Eliot's political ideal of liberal traditionalism.

The Geography of Consciousness

In "The Natural History of German Life," Eliot's famous 1857 essay long read as an implicit manifesto for her own artistic practice, Eliot calls for "social novels" dedicated to tracing what she calls "the Natural History of social bodies." These social novels would undertake to represent the social groups based on the inductive method of direct observation, taking their subjects from "life" instead of "idyllic literature," and thus teaching us "to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness" (290, 271). Eliot suggests that this affective education through art is especially important for liberal social policies and reforms, whose appeals are "founded on generalizations and statistics" and thus are incapable of generating the moral sentiment required for systematic cooperation. Further, the abstract ideals of liberalism—democratic representation, the rights of man, the rule of law—cannot by themselves elicit the feelings that make it possible to put, even provisionally, common welfare ahead of the egoistic pursuit of personal gain. As Eliot writes in her essay on Young, "emotion links itself with particulars, and only in a faint and secondary manner with abstractions." Where this appears not to be the case and abstractions seem to be accompanied by powerful feelings, these feelings are either "humbug," as in the case of Young himself, or an especially active intellect and powerful imagination have made it possible for the "abstract term rapidly and vividly [to call]

up the particulars it represents, these particulars being the true source of the emotion” (“Worldliness and Other-Worldliness” 371). For Eliot, feelings must be accompanied by particulars acting as sources or anchors, in the form of concrete objects or that of particularized representations such as those that make up the Victorian novel.¹³

Eliot’s frequently voiced criticism of cosmopolitanism takes its force from this insistence that affect needs particular objects or representations. She contends that despite the pretension of cosmopolitanism that the abstract concept of common humanity is sufficient to claim our emotional allegiance, affection and duty necessarily “radiate from a center,” and therefore “the time is not come for cosmopolitanism to be highly virtuous” (“The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” 147). Eliot finds cosmopolitan childhoods, such as Gwendolyn Harleth’s in *Daniel Deronda*, particularly troubling because, in addition to cutting off the child from the objects accompanying the feeling of Englishness, an uprooted or excessively mobile childhood threatens the child’s capacity to experience feeling in general. Unlike the situated child, the cosmopolitan child’s mobility prevents her from repeating her affective responses to the objects that surround her, and without this repetition she cannot develop what Eliot calls the “stored residues of passion” that are spontaneously accessed whenever the adult comes into contact with the same or similar objects (“How We Come to Give Ourselves False Testimonials and Believe in Them,” 110). The affective memories that make up these stores are crucial to any emotional encounter with a particular object since, Eliot contends in *Adam Bede*, “the secret of our emotions never lies in the bare object, but in its subtle relations to our own past” (*Adam Bede* 199). I discuss the neuroscientific basis for Eliot’s concept of “stores” of

¹³ This alignment of the novel with the moral and affective apprehension of particulars is perhaps the fundamental axiom of all Victorian fiction.

passion below. I want to turn first to another repository of memory in Eliot's writing: the landscape of particular objects itself.

The extended and detailed descriptions of the landscapes of the rural midlands in Eliot's writing resemble Ruskin's contemporary efforts to read England's social history in its architecture. Eliot's debt to Ruskin is particularly apparent in, for example, the description of St. Oggs in *The Mill on the Floss*, whose buildings embody the various stages of English history like the growth of a "millennial tree" (115). Eliot, however, reads English history not only in its architecture, its cathedrals and grand halls, but also in every place where "human labor has wrought itself into what one may call the speech of the landscape." As it turns out, this speech is exceptionally audible in England because England's natural landscape lacks the monumental features that drown out human efforts elsewhere. What, Eliot asks, "does it signify that a Lilliputian train passes over a viaduct amidst the abysses of the Apennines, or that a caravan laden with a nation's offerings creeps across the unresting sameness of the desert, or that a petty cloud of steam sweeps for an instant over the face of an Egyptian colossus immovably submitting to its slow burial beneath the sand?" In contrast to these monumental regions where human labor lacks meaning, "our woodlands and pastures, our hedge-parted corn fields and meadows, our bits of high common where we used to plant the windmills, our quiet little rivers here and there fit to turn a mill-wheel, our villages along the old coach roads, are all easily alterable lineaments that seem to make the face of our Motherland sympathetic with the laborious lives of her children. She does not take their ploughs and wagons contemptuously, but rather makes every hovel and every sheepfold, every railed bridge or fallen-tree trunk an agreeably noticeable incident; not a mere speck in the midst of unmeasured vastness, but a piece of our social history in pictorial writing" ("Looking Backward" 24-5).

Eliot seems to suggest here that social history engraves itself on the natural landscape like writing (or drawing) on a blank page. Eliot would thus seem to view the natural landscape in England as what Jules Law has called “distributive space”: a “pure extension, over which particular patterns...may be traced” (113). The version of distributive space Law traces in Mary Kingsley’s work likewise depends on an analogy drawn between the landscape and language. However, Eliot’s apparently natural landscapes already bear the marks of human labor. In the passages above, not just deserts and mountains but also human monuments render human labor meaningless, while the features of the Motherland that are so amenable to transformation by work include villages and fields as well as woodlands and quiet rivers. The Motherland in Eliot’s description finally seems less a blank page on which social history inscribes itself than a palimpsest, and its capacity for sympathy with human labor turns out to depend on a continual process of re-inscription. And in this respect the landscape mirrors the theory of consciousness advanced by Eliot’s spouse, G.H. Lewes.

A polymath, Lewes attempted to explain the physiological processes underlying consciousness in his 1860 *The Physiology of Common Life*, and later used this analysis as the basis of a more general theory of consciousness in *Problems of Life and Mind*, the multi-volume, unfinished series in which he tried to establish a positivist method for metaphysical speculation. Lewes framed *The Physiology of Common Life* as both a contribution to and a means of popularizing the burgeoning field of neural science. There, Lewes argues that consciousness or mind, understood as encompassing thought, sensation, and volition, is not located only in the brain, but rather throughout the body in the nervous system. The nervous system itself is made up of nerve fibers, which send out stimuli in response to received impressions, and nerve cells, concentrated in ganglionic centers that register and re-direct the stimuli

sent out by excited fibers. Lewes treats the nervous system as an example of Newtonian economy; each excitation of the nerve fibers cannot terminate in itself, but passes along a series of nervous pathways via other Ganglia and nerve fibers and ends either in stimulating a muscular contraction, which Lewes calls “Reflex Action,” or in stimulating other, secondary sensations, which he calls “Reflex Feeling,” and most often in stimulating both reflex action and reflex feeling together. Unlike reflex action, which absorbs the neural stimulus in a muscular contraction, reflex feeling passes the excitation along the pathways of the nervous systems in trains of secondary sensations that can ultimately reach the brain and arrest attention. Lewes emphasizes, however, that not all feeling is consciously experienced. Or rather, he distinguishes between consciousness and attention: “to have a sensation, and to be conscious of it, are one and the same thing; but to have a sensation and to attend to it, are two different things. Attention is the direction of the consciousness—not the consciousness itself” (*Physiology of Common Life* 52). In fact, Lewes argues that we can only attend to one of a simultaneous crowd of sensations at a time.

While any act of perception is thus subject to these limitations of attention, however, our minds compensate for the inability to focus on more than one sensation at a time by drawing from prior experiences. This argument is made implicitly in *The Physiology of Common Life* and directly in *Problems of Life and Mind*, where Lewes contends that when we attend to a neural excitation, we blend it in “the Perceptive Centre...with the residua of other excitations.”¹⁴ These residua are not deposits of material; rather, they are “modifications [in] the structure” of the nervous system produced by experience. Residua, in other words, are the pathways of secondary

¹⁴ See *Problems of Life and Mind*, 122, 110. Lewes argues that while we can only attend to our senses of an object successively, the act of perception synthesizes these successively experienced sensations. In this respect, perception is a miniature resolution of what Nicholas Dames has recently described as a crucial formal and political problem in *Daniel Deronda*: the need to “turn diachrony into synchrony, to make succession into accumulative, atemporal wholes.” See Dames, 123-165.

sensation established by one's sense of a particular object. The neural pathways that are thus gradually carved out by experience become for Lewes the highways of sensation; once one's sense of an object has taken a particular route, that route is an open channel to receive like impressions. As these pathways accumulate and overlap with each other, consciousness is written and rewritten by experience, and here Lewes differs crucially from the classical Lockean account of consciousness insofar as for him, "the sensitive mechanism is not a simple mechanism, and as such constant, but a variable mechanism, which has a *history*. What the senses inscribe on it, are not merely the changes of the external world, but these characters are commingled with those of preceding inscriptions. The sensitive subject is no *tabula rasa*. It is not a blank sheet of paper but a palimpsest"(149).¹⁵

The figure of the palimpsest evokes a non-teleological process of continual reinscription, but this figure is in tension with a progress narrative Lewes wants to tell about the development of consciousness, a narrative that also crystallizes some of the incoherence characterizing the Victorian opposition of feeling and reflection. The growth and development of consciousness begins from a state of feeling nebulous, diffusive, and self-centered in the extreme. In infancy, sensibility itself is a "chaos of vague sentience," a massive and diffusive excitation without the qualitative distinctions made possible by defined pathways of sensation carved out within the nervous system. As those pathways are established through repeated experiences, that chaos of sensation becomes more and more differentiated, and as consciousness makes those qualitative differentiations, it "projects" those defined feelings outside itself as objects. The development of neural pathways thus enables the simultaneous

¹⁵ The history of consciousness embraces more than personal experience, moreover. Ancestral experiences are transmitted as a set of pathways that the infant passes through during development (Lewes' account clearly draws from recapitulation theory, whose central claim was that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny). These ancestral pathways are the mental inscriptions we already bear before they are written over by personal experience. See *Problems of Life and Mind*, 109-111 and 220-221.

emergence of an internal, affective order and an external, objective order, in which “the nebula of the external is condensed into objective phenomena, and the confused irradiation of Sensibility is grouped into feelings” (133, 169-70). As the infant’s neural pathways are engraved, she gains mastery over the chaos of sensation and the object world mediated by sensation. She also gains, according to Lewes, mastery over her feelings: “discriminations [of feelings and objects] are the germs of Intelligence, and when Intelligence itself becomes developed by the large accumulations of such discriminations, it reacts on the feelings, guiding them more and more, and converting blind Impulse into clear Volition” (128).

Lewes’ account of the development of neural pathways would thus seem to be a story of self-mastery, in which the appropriately happy ending is the arrival at awareness and control of one’s own feelings. Yet if we push a bit past the point of narrative closure in this *bildungsroman*, we will find that this neat resolution undoes itself, as self-awareness and agency lapse back into semi-consciousness and unfreedom. The culprits responsible for this narrative reversal are the very same neural pathways that seemed to be the route to self-mastery. We can begin to grasp the reasons for this transformation by noting that Lewes’ account of the infant’s development of consciousness parallels his account in *Problems of Life and Mind* and *The Physiology of Common Life* of how one acquires new skills, such as learning to play a musical instrument, or to speak a new language, or simply to perform unaccustomed movements of any kind. What makes these activities difficult initially is the same absence of defined neural pathways resulting in the chaos of vague sentience that defines consciousness in infancy. Just as an infant’s repeated experiences establish neural pathways that differentiate massively diffuse sensation into defined feelings, so does practice—the repetition of sensations and movements—cut more and more defined paths through the nervous system that enable the faster

recall of the correct word, the more precise execution of the correct movement. But as neural pathways enhance facility, they also undermine agency. As pathways become more deeply engraved, sensation tracks along their smoothed grooves regardless of conscious intention. Deliberate action becomes instinct or habit, and “what was facultative [becomes] fixed, what was voluntary [becomes] involuntary.” Moreover, thoughts, especially what Lewes calls “intuitive judgments,” are also just as susceptible as sensations and actions to this transformation. Since intuitive judgments are conclusions arrived at so rapidly that their premises are not consciously recognized, Lewes notes that “they are to the mind what automatic actions are to the body” (*Problems of Life and Mind* 130, 343). While Lewes argues that the element of choice does not totally disappear when intentional actions or thoughts become automatic, his unease about this apparent loss of volition is plainly apparent in his figure of the “vigorous thinker.” The thoughts of vigorous thinkers, Lewes writes, “are ever finding new pathways instead of moving amid old associations. The vigorous thinker thinks for himself; the vigorous writer expresses what he means, and does not suffer one phrase automatically to determine another” (*Physiology of Common Life* 57). Defined above all by his autonomy and self-control, the vigorous thinker/writer is always in the middle of the process of creating new routes for thought and feeling. The vigorous thinker thus negotiates a perilous space of self-mastery between a state of pre-rational paralysis where there is a total absence of any control, and a state of hyper-rational automation where feelings and thoughts become pre-determined and deliberate consent disappears.

While deeply engraved neural pathways thus threaten to pre-determine both thoughts and feelings, Lewes also suggests that as neural pathways become more established they refine feeling into thought. Neural pathways, as we have seen, restrict sensation, funneling it into the established channels of the nervous system. In

doing so, pathways enable the differentiation and management of sensation, but Lewes contends that they also enable sensation to pass into representation. In proportion as the “massiveness” and “intensity” of sensations decrease, “they become more and more *Signs*, and thus become fitted to enter into intellectual operations which are purely symbolical. The least *sensible* of the Senses...is Sight, and therefore it is the most intellectual. It is the most *impersonal*—that which draws with it the least amount of feeling” (*Problems of Life and Mind* 121). Thought begins as personal feeling disappears. Lewes takes the emergence of thought with the attenuation of feeling as the goal of human progress, a progress that closely parallels the development of consciousness. He argues that progress consists of “an ever-increasing tendency towards more and more remote conceptions and indirect methods, detaching the mind more and more from sensible observation.” He cites the example of contemporary trade, in which “the complicated processes of sowing, reaping, collecting, shipping, and delivering a quantity of wheat are condensed into the entry of a few words in a ledger.” As neural pathways develop and more effectively channel sensation, the chaos of vague sentience is “condensed into objects,” and those sensible objects are in turn condensed into signs (*Problems of Life and Mind* 158, 93). This progress narrative is for Lewes as much an ethical as an economic or philosophical triumph. As feelings are condensed into objects, attention is directed away from the self, which is thus led to a disinterested desire to understand persons and objects not only as means for satisfying a desire, and a capacity to bracket selfish desires for the sake of satisfying “sympathetic impulses” (153).

Lewes’ progress narrative of the emergence of “impersonal” thought attests to the premium placed on Arnoldian disinterestedness as a defining quality of thought and ethics in mid-Victorian liberal thought. The power and pervasiveness of this argument is all the more in evidence in Lewes’ work in that he seems to take it for

granted despite the fact that it flatly contradicts one of his three first principles of psychology.¹⁶ Even apart from this contradiction, moreover, Lewes' account of our arrival at disinterestedness is also problematic to the extent that disinterestedness depends on restricting sensation to neural pathways that thus become more and more set. In this way, Lewes' ideal of disinterestedness, no less than Arnold's, is subject to the same widespread concern, identified by David Wayne Thomas, that the mid-Victorian liberal ideal of many-sidedness could sap conviction and drain away vigor. But the terms Lewes uses to articulate this concern seem not to match exactly those terms more often used in this public debate as Thomas has characterized it. In *Culture and Anarchy*, for example, a disinterested Hellenism is paralyzed in the sense that it is constitutionally incapable of accomplishing anything besides criticism, the free play of the faculties, and so requires the supplement of a more vigorous Hebraism comprised of feeling and acting. On the other hand, Hebraistic feeling and acting undirected by Hellenistic thought is, Arnold argues, dangerous and destructive. In Lewes' work, in contrast, a chaotic paralysis is the result of a kind of overload of sensation. Excessive thought, insofar as it is the product of ever-constricting neural pathways, undermines liberal agency by prompting unwilled activity, leading to a state in which certain feelings and thoughts become so efficiently routinized as to be automatic and coercive. Lewes thus seems to reverse the dangers entailed by this dual threat to liberal agency. The difference stems from the different roles assigned to reflection and feeling in each case. For Arnold, feeling can be both conservative, when it is practiced by a narrow Hebraism that maintains an uncritical adherence to tradition, and nihilistically radical,

¹⁶ Appropriately enough, Lewes defines the principle in question as "the law of interest." At times, he seems to restrict the definition of this law to the axiom that we can only recognize what is sufficiently like former experiences for our neural pathways to be able to process, but in both *The Physiology of Common Life* and *Problems of Life and Mind*, Lewes also broadens this restricted definition to contend that our emotions and sentiments—and the bodily sensations that contribute most directly to these—actually dictate what we experience, perceive, and think. See *Physiology of Common Life*, 64-5 and *Problems of Life and Mind*, 112, 123-4.

when it is understood as the solipsistic, working-class pleasure-seeking of “doing as one likes.” The Philistinism of doing as one likes is a recognizable version of Lewes’ “chaos of vague sentience,” while Hebraism starts to look more like the performance of compulsive actions and thoughts. Lewes suggests, however, that compulsive, Hebraistic action is not the result of uncritical feeling but of the attenuation of feeling. The physiological act of vigorous thinking, thinking that seeks out new pathways, must always be accompanied by new and un-attenuated sensation. The vigorous thinker retains her vigor but also her capacity for reflection because she does not divide thought from feeling. Moreover, if sympathy is feeling for others, feeling what one imagines the other is feeling, then human sympathy, no less than the sympathy of a landscape, depends on the continual creation of new and unaccustomed neural pathways. The vigorous thinker, whose consciousness is a palimpsest open to the re-inscription of new pathways, is capable of greater sympathy, and is therefore more ethical, as well as more reflective, than the person who seems to have passed beyond all personal feeling into disinterestedness.

Impressing Minds

A similarly ambivalent relationship between feeling, reflection, and disinterestedness haunts Maggie Tulliver, the heroine of Eliot’s 1860 novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, which she completed just as Lewes finished the second volume of *The Physiology of Common Life*. Maggie’s passionate sensibility draws her into conflict with the provincial community of St. Oggs, especially with her Puritanical brother Tom, and eventually with her own sense of right duty and ethical conduct when she falls in love and almost elopes with her cousin’s fiancé, Stephen Guest. Maggie ultimately renounces her chance for a tainted happiness with Stephen, but this ethical victory is not a triumph of impersonal principle over personal feeling. Rather,

Maggie's dilemma rehearses that of Lewes' vigorous thinker, torn between unruly feelings and desires and dry, affectless abstraction. *The Mill on the Floss*, I argue, attempts to bridge disinterestedness and personal feeling in sympathy, and it does so by invoking the palimpsestic consciousness described by Lewes.

Maggie first learns to aspire to disinterestedness after a lawsuit bankrupts her family and she is pulled from school to help her mother perform the domestic labor in their newly impoverished household. In her reduced circumstances, Maggie's access to music and books is sharply curtailed, but when she is given a set of second-hand books by Bob Jakin, she discovers among them an old copy of Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* and experiences something akin to a spiritual and moral awakening: "for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires—of taking her stand out of herself, and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely guided whole...and, in the ardour of first discovery, renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain" (*Mill on the Floss* 290-1). What Maggie discovers here is the possibility of ekstasis, a self-transcendence through a "perfect renunciation" (385) of personal desire. The irony, of course, is that Maggie initially thinks that this perfect renunciation is the gateway to ecstasy in both senses of the word—as, that is, both the transcendence of self and as an intensely pleasurable sensation centered in the person.

Even Maggie's imperfect renunciation is jeopardized when she begins secretly meeting Philip Wakem on walks near her home in the Red Deeps. Maggie is troubled by the necessity she is under to conceal her meetings with Philip from her family, but the significance of this deception pales, in her mind, compared to the danger that Philip, by lending her books and singing to her, is providing her with a "new interest" that will ultimately bring her under "the seductive guidance of illimitable wants" (303,

325). The danger, in other words, is that Philip is stimulating and thus reinvigorating Maggie's sensibility, which seems the seat of voracious desires. Philip himself touts his ability to reinvigorate Maggie's sensibility by restoring her access to books and music as one of the most important reasons Maggie should keep seeing him. Maggie's attempt at self-renunciation, Philip claims, is no more than a "narrow asceticism" that fearfully "seek[s] safety in negations" (306, 329). Philip's arguments against Maggie's asceticism are prophetic, and often echoed or approved by the narrator, who only condemns his use of them as justifications of his secret meetings with Maggie. Philip contends that Maggie's asceticism will undermine her self-mastery because her denial of "rational satisfactions" will weaken her capacity to exert control over her own desires and feelings, which will come to assault her in the form of "savage appetite[s]" (329). If Maggie's ascetic ambitions threaten ultimately to intensify her sensibility, in the interim her asceticism renders her insensible. Her renunciations, according to Philip, amount only to "blinding and deafening [her]self to all but one train of impressions" (335). Philip points out to Maggie not only the element of egoistic feeling in her desire for a perfect renunciation, but also the irony that this egoistic desire for "satisfaction" also lessens her capacity for feeling: "joy and peace are not resignation: resignation is the willing endurance of a pain that is not allayed—that you don't expect to be allayed. Stupefaction is not resignation: and it is stupefaction to remain in ignorance—to shut up all the avenues by which the life of your fellow-men might become known to you" (328). Just as Maggie's self-mastery through renunciation threatens to intensify her sensibility so that it becomes unmanageable, her egoistic desire for joy and peace through renunciation threatens to stupefy her and to render her insensible to her "fellow-men." Maggie's desire for self-transcendence through renunciation, in short, endangers her capacity for sympathy, and to that extent immures her in her own self that much more effectively.

Faced with intensified and overmastering feeling on the one hand, and a stupefying, narrowly-restricted range of feeling on the other, Maggie's dilemma rehearses the perils negotiated by Lewes' vigorous thinker. Like the vigorous thinker, she must retain a self-mastery beset by unpredictable and chaotic sensations and desires. Her ambitions to achieve this mastery via disinterestedness, the bracketing or attenuating of personal feeling, likewise amount to a fantasy that would find freedom in determinism.¹⁷ This dilemma underlies Maggie's moral conflict about her meetings with Philip and those meetings' revival of her sensibility. Maggie herself thinks of this moral problem as a conflict between heeding a voice that makes "sweet music" and a voice that makes "monotonous warnings"(304). While Maggie's susceptibility to music is an insistent emblem of her sensibility in the novel, the monotony of the other voice—which urges Maggie to confine herself to "one train of impressions"—echoes a passage from the novel's first half in which the narrator suggests that the aesthetic and affective charge of the landscapes amidst which she grew up likewise derives from a monotony of experience:

What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known, and *loved* because it is known?...what grove of tropic palms...could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibers within me as this home-scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird notes, this sky, with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows—such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable

¹⁷ See, for example, Maggie's proclamation to Philip that "our life is determined for us—and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing, and only think of bearing what is laid upon us, and doing what is given us to do" (302). That Maggie Tulliver faces this dilemma provides a useful qualification to David Wayne Thomas' account of Victorian worries that liberalism saps vigor. Thomas argues that these worries reflect wider concerns about masculinity and the status of intellectual labor. Maggie's dilemma indicates that the threat that many-sidedness could undermine agency was not exclusively a man's problem. See Thomas, 13-4.

associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass to-day, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years which still live in us, and transform our perception into love. (41-2)

The monotony of these impressions accounts, in part, for their power. Through sheer dint of repetition, they deepen perception by enabling any momentary sensation to recall the multilayered memories of prior such experiences, to reach, as Eliot puts it elsewhere, “stored residues of passion.” These residues recall Lewes’ perceptual “residua”—the neural channels left behind by repeated experiences—an allusion to neural channels that Eliot also makes in the passage above by suggesting that the power of the home-scene lies in its capacity to thrill “deep and delicate fibers.” Since consciousness is written by these pathways of sensation, bygone sunshine and grass *do*, physiologically speaking, continue to live in us as neural pathways that allow our perception of similar sunshine and grass to become sharper and more defined. When we encounter landscapes similar to those in which we grew up, the sensations they stimulate in us track along the old neural pathways and excite the old trains of associations and secondary feeling. The landscapes of our childhood therefore seem to concentrate in themselves our memories of the feelings and associations with which we experienced those landscapes as children. In this way, those landscapes are like a language, a system of signs that act as a shorthand for a complex of sense experiences.

At the same time, Eliot’s narrator markedly distinguishes between the affective responses elicited by the immediate sense experience of a landscape and those that are elicited by language and representation. In a similar passage describing Mr. Tulliver’s love for the mill, for example, the narrator explains that there “he knew the sound of every gate and door, and felt that the shape and colour of every roof and weather-stain

and broken hillock was good, because his growing senses had been fed on them.” The narrator contrasts Mr. Tulliver’s intimate bond to the mill with a cosmopolitanism mediated by representation instead of by sense experience, which the narrator describes as “our instructed vagrancy...which is nourished on books of travel, and stretches the theater of its imagination to the Zambesi” (263). In another passage describing Tom’s first homecoming after being sent away to school, the narrator celebrates “the ease we feel in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labour of choice and where the outer world seemed only an extension of our personality.” In a proto-Arnoldian vein, the narrator claims that such affection for imperfect, even homely things acts as a crucial and necessary check on the tendency to reform and “improvement,” and defends those attachments against “those severely regulated minds” whose attachments are based only on “the demonstrable superiority of qualities” (151-2). In these passages, which are echoed throughout Eliot’s writings, the narrator implicitly draws on familiar Victorian polemics against the balefully inhuman and tyrannical effects of an ungrounded commitment to rationalism and abstraction, typically emblemized in the French Revolution. As we have seen, Eliot elsewhere denies that abstraction—under which heading she classes signs and representation—could elicit affection at all and she therefore claimed that cosmopolitanism is an insufficient basis for ethical conduct. Eliot also, however, consistently figured the landscape as a set of signs, whether as “social history in pictorial writing” or as concentrated abstractions of our childhood memories and associations. The latter set of signs—those that make up the landscapes of our childhood—might seem to be qualitatively different from other abstractions because, rather than representations of objects with which we have never had any contact, they are the concentrated forms of our own sense experiences and can reproduce those sense experiences by stimulating old neural pathways. But Eliot, like

Lewes, worried that as those sense-experiences become more concentrated in memory, they also lose the capacity to be affecting. “The recollections of the past,” observed Latimer, the protagonist of Eliot’s 1859 *The Lifted Veil*, “become contracted in the rapidity of thought till they sometimes bear hardly a more distinct resemblance to the external reality than the forms of an oriental alphabet to the objects that suggested them” (35). While Latimer is thinking primarily of how our memories of events become distorted, it is hard not to hear in this passage an echo of Lewes’ argument that as our sensations and feelings contract into established neural pathways, feeling itself tends to disappear.

It is hard, too, not to hear the echo of the narrator’s “sweet monotony” in the decidedly sour “monotonous warning” that would have Maggie blind and deafen herself “to all but one train of impressions.” During the year that she continues her secret meetings with Philip in the Red Deeps, Maggie has in her own family two vivid examples of such monotonous insensibility in her father and brother. Under the sway of grief and shame over his bankruptcy and obsessed with revenging himself on Lawyer Wakem, Mr. Tulliver loses his capacity for “new feelings” and his mind seems given over to a mechanized repetition: “when uncultured minds, confined to a narrow range of personal experience, are under the pressure of continued misfortune, their inward life is apt to become a perpetually repeated round of sad and bitter thoughts...as if they were machines set to a recurrent series of movements”(294, 280). While Tom is capable of far greater self-control than his father, his mind seems likewise confined and resistant to new thought and feeling. Though *Culture and Anarchy* would only appear in 1869, Tom reads like an Arnoldian Hebrew *avant la lettre*. With his “deficient power of apprehending signs and abstractions” (169) and a mind holding only prejudices “to fill up the void of spontaneous ideas” (456) Tom bears a striking resemblance to the pre-modern German peasants Eliot describes in

“The Natural History of German Life” (*Mill on the Floss* 169, 456). Tom is not only a lower-order thinker, however; in Tom’s case, as in the case of Eliot’s German peasants, but unlike that of Arnold’s Hebrew, customs and prejudices seem to fill in for sentiments and affections as well as for ideas. Tom, the narrator remarks, “was a boy who adhered tenaciously to impressions once received; as with all minds in which mere perception predominates over thought and emotion, the external remained to him rigidly what it was in the first instance” (166). The reliable monotony of Tom’s impressions of St. Oggs and the mill, along with the intimate bond with those landscapes that he shares with Maggie, here fail to supplement and affectively transform his perception. Tom’s perception seems rather to keep his thought and emotion in check, and, in this sense, it is the predominance of a rigidly routinized perception in his mind that renders him, finally, pharisaical and unsympathetic.

The blunting of Maggie’s sensibility through renunciation endangers her capacity for sympathy, but her capacity for sympathy is no less vulnerable to her sensibility itself. Eliot frames Maggie’s ethical crisis upon finding that she has fallen in love with Stephen Guest as a context between feeling and reflection. Notwithstanding Stephen’s facetious claims about the “predominance of the reflective powers” (416) in his nature or his special capacities for “stern reason” (431), he and Maggie share a tendency to suppress reflection and act without conscious intention during their shadow courtship, especially during its initial stages, when “neither of them had begun to reflect on the matter, or silently to ask, ‘To what does all this tend?’” Maggie only felt that life was revealing something quite new to her; and she was absorbed in the direct, immediate experience, without any energy left for taking account of it and reasoning about it” (403). Even after it becomes impossible to ignore their growing feelings for each other, the continuation of their courtship depends on this tendency insofar as it conflicts with their deliberate resolution not to

pursue each other or reveal their feelings to Lucy or Philip. In acting against this resolution, Stephen and Maggie *thoughtlessly* give themselves over to their passions.

The climax of Maggie's dilemma is also the most emblematic instance of her uncritical absorption in "immediate experience." When circumstances lead to Stephen taking Philip's place on a planned boat-trip with Maggie down the Floss, the two end up drifting with the current too far down-river to return to St. Oggs by that night. In keeping with this heavy-handed metaphor, Maggie spends her boat-trip unable to recognize her surroundings, "dimly conscious," and as if borne along "without any act of her own will" (464). In this way, Maggie makes "the wayward choice of her own passion" (471). But because she makes this choice without the participation of her waking reason, it is a choice made without deliberate consent, which is to say, not properly a choice at all. When Maggie returns to herself after her reverie on the Floss, her deliberate choice is to refuse to elope with Stephen and return to St. Oggs. Stephen interprets her balancing and choosing in this regard as a sign of deficient feeling, and the narrator's description of her departure from Stephen seems to reinforce his sense that this chosen renunciation has thrust Maggie back into the old round of insensible determinism: "Maggie was not conscious of a decision as she turned away from that gloomy averted face, and walked out of the room; it was like an automatic action that fulfils a forgotten intention" (479). Unlike her earlier dream of a perfect renunciation, however, Maggie's renunciation of Stephen rests on a qualified understanding of the ekstasis made possible by sympathy. Sympathy offers Eliot's characters the promise of self-transcendence by allowing them to experience indirectly the feelings of another person. This capacity for an "enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the life of others" is sympathy's positive affect, an affect that could be described as ecstatic insofar as it is independent of personal experience and, in Philip's evocative phrase, "disembodied of selfish desire" (503).

Eliot's sympathetic ekstasis also seems to resemble disinterested reflection. Eliot, drawing from the theories of sympathy advanced in the eighteenth century by Hume and Smith, suggests that self-conception and self-criticism depend on sympathizing with a collective group or with others' impressions of oneself.¹⁸ Maggie's sympathetic identification, inspired by Thomas á Kempis, with "a divinely guided whole" enables the act of self-distancing, the "taking her stand out of herself," that is the basis of reflection and self-criticism. There is a limit to this self-transcendence, however, because Eliot insists that sympathy must be anchored in bodily experience, and such is especially the case for Maggie's sympathy with Lucy and Philip. Instead of finding "quiet ecstasy" (471) in a renunciation of personal desires, Maggie realizes that acts of renunciation motivated by sympathy bring not peace but a willing endurance of pain. Moreover, a willed endurance of pain, such as Maggie experiences in giving up Stephen, seems necessary for the sympathetic investment in another's feelings because to desire truly not to hurt another in a given way, one must have been thus hurt oneself.¹⁹ Maggie finally refuses to elope because, having suffered and suffering herself, she has experienced the pain she would give to Philip and Lucy by betraying them. "I see—I feel their trouble now," she explains to Stephen, "it is as if it were branded on my mind" (478). Maggie's language here echoes a remark by Latimer in *The Lifted Veil* that more explicitly declares Eliot's conviction that the knowledge necessary for sympathy must be based on shared sense experience. Describing his seven years of marital estrangement, Latimer worries that

¹⁸ On Hume, see Pinch, 17-50. For Smith's argument that sympathy with an imaginary "impartial spectator" is fundamental to conceptions of identity and to conscience, see Smith, 128-132 and 155-182. The preceding account of sympathy as self-criticism has parallels with work on sympathy in Eliot by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth. Ermarth, however, does not trace Eliot's thinking back to Hume and Smith and her argument elides the instabilities that unsettle Eliot's distinctions between sympathy and egoism, which I take up below. See Deeds, 24-6.

¹⁹ Daniel Deronda, for example, remarks to Gwendolyn that "our keen feeling for ourselves might end in giving us a keen feeling for others, if, when we are suffering acutely, we were to consider that others go through the same sharp experience. That is a sort of remorse before commission" (*Daniel Deronda* 450).

readers will fail to sympathize properly with his experience because they have only read his descriptions of it, and not lived through it: “we learn *words* by rote, but not their meaning; *that* must be paid for with our life-blood, and printed in the subtle fibers of our nerves” (34).

Maggie’s confident assertion and Latimer’s skeptical complaint both hint at a problem unsettling the ethical work of sympathy in Eliot’s writing. If sympathy requires, as Latimer and Maggie suggest, a shared sense experience, then the range of people with whom one can sympathize is radically circumscribed. Even between those people whose experiences most closely resemble one another, sympathy would be necessarily vague and imperfect, because one’s knowledge of the other’s experience could never be exact.²⁰ Moreover, Latimer’s assertion that representations are by themselves untrustworthy as guides to another person’s experience undercuts the moral justification that Eliot claims for her fiction: that art enlarges readers’ sympathies by “amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowmen beyond the bounds of our personal lot”(“Natural History of German Life” 271). Eliot’s attempts to enlarge readers’ sympathies seem hobbled by this epistemological problem. Moreover, as Thomas Albrecht has recently argued, the fact that one’s sympathy with another person must always be based on verbal descriptions of the other’s experience—a fact obliquely acknowledged in Eliot’s writing—undermines the ethical value of sympathy itself. In Albrecht’s account, any sympathetic insight into the other’s consciousness and experience is, in Eliot’s writing, only one possible interpretation of the cluster of signs that make up the other’s character to even the closest observer. The sympathetic observer reads the other through metaphors, figures that “establish a relation between the other and something that is already familiar to

²⁰ Many critics have noted this problem with sympathy in Eliot’s writing. For just one example, see Marshall, 214-9.

oneself in order to make the other more familiar” (Albrecht 450). To make the other familiar through metaphor in this way, however, is to interpret the other’s experience only in relation to oneself, to what is familiar to oneself. Proceeding through such acts of familiarization, sympathy is incapable of fulfilling Eliot’s ethical imperative to acknowledge the other as other, to see the other not egoistically, only in relation to oneself, but as an autonomous agent. Sympathy in Eliot’s writing, Albrecht argues, is not a means of transcending egoism. The conflict Albrecht identifies in Eliot’s writing—between an ethical imperative to acknowledge alterity and a sympathetic ethics incapable of achieving that acknowledgement—rehearses a central dilemma in Victorian liberalism: the tension between the negative liberty of individuals and the imperatives of common sense--the shared values and assumptions, indispensable to the liberal polity, that fell to aesthetic culture to inculcate in the public (Lloyd and Thomas 1-30). Eliot’s attempts to expand her readers’ sympathy participate in the larger political project of Victorian aesthetic culture to fashion a common sense. However, Eliot’s attempts to expand sympathy do not amount merely to a project of coercive consensus-building. Rather, sympathy for Eliot functions equally to prevent common sense from ossifying and becoming unreflective by dialogically transforming established norms.

The dialogic transformation effected by Eliot’s sympathetic ethics is evident in the rhetorical figures she associates with sympathy. Metaphor, for example, does work by making the strange familiar, but it is also the trope we use to shift between different languages or codes, thereby putting different language systems into dialogue with each other.²¹ Even more than metaphor, however, I argue that the rhetorical figure Eliot most closely associates with sympathy is palimpsest. Both Maggie’s and Latimer’s metaphors for sympathetic feeling as written directly into the mind—as

²¹ On this point, see Jakobson.

branded on the mind or written in the nerves—evoke this figure. On the one hand, this image of a writing grounded directly in sense experience, a writing whose medium is the nervous system, seems like a fantastic, even grotesque, version of empiricism. But, especially in the context of Lewes' *The Physiology of Common Life*, written concurrently with *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Lifted Veil*, this figure does not ground representation in sense experience so much as it unmoors sense experience. For if sense experience writes itself into the mind, sense experience is written in turn by the neural channels available to register and process it. Sense experience itself, in other words, becomes no less a palimpsest than the mind it (re)writes. In Latimer's image of a meaning written into the nerves, the meaning of a word is not a verifiable impression beyond language but is itself *like* writing, with all the instabilities that such a comparison entails for Eliot. One such instability that is crucial for sympathy is our inevitable recourse to metaphor whenever we attempt to define the meaning of a given sign. Eliot points out this necessity in a famous passage in *The Mill on the Floss*, where she speculates that Aristotle, had he been a modern instead of an ancient, would have lamented the fact "that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else" (*Mill on the Floss* 140). The lament is, obviously, somewhat facetious, but the acknowledgement—which Maggie makes and Tom denies—that meaning is indeterminate runs parallel to the novel's depiction of sympathy as based on a capacity for perceptions and sensations that are similarly open-ended and malleable, rather than fixed and routinized. Being thus open to differences in meaning, to indeterminacy in meaning, is, finally, to be open to the re-inscriptions of the mind that allow for sympathy in *The Mill on the Floss*.

This sympathetic willingness to defamiliarize perception and recognize multiple, overlapping meanings is Eliot's privileged mode of critical reflection. Sympathetic reflection for Eliot is intimately a matter of feeling, of shifts and mobility

in the registration of sensations, which are not fixed and unalterable but rather slide indeterminately, like language. As a mode of agency, sympathetic reflection, like Lewes' vigorous thinking, is built on the gambit of submitting to an imperfection of self-control in order to preserve volition more broadly. Eliot's depictions of moments of sympathetic understanding reflect the momentary loss of self-control in sympathetic reflection. Such moments, when a character achieves sympathetic insight through a recognition of alternative meanings, are often described as surprising, even as shocking, and in *The Mill on the Floss*, the implicit analogue of these experiences is the flood.²² After, for example, Maggie rescues Tom from his flooding house, Eliot uses flood imagery to narrate Tom's final awakening to sympathy with his sister when "the full meaning of what had happened rushed upon his mind. It came with so overpowering a force—it was such a new revelation to his spirit, of the depths in life, that had lain beyond his vision which he had fancied so keen and clear—that he was unable to ask a question" (*Mill on the Floss* 520). The violence and destruction of the flood that will shortly kill both siblings, along with the fact that Tom is rendered mute by sympathy, imply that Eliot's gambit for agency may be more risky than it seems. As I argue in this chapter's final section, Eliot herself eventually became unnerved by the potential violence and speed of alteration that her ideal of sympathy made possible, and attempted to circumscribe its effects in her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*.

Spellbound Habit: Sympathy and National Consciousness

For Daniel Deronda, idling through his twenties unable to choose a career for lack of a defined social purpose, sympathy and reflection continue to pull together, but

²² In "The Natural History of German Life," for example, Eliot claims that the greatest social benefit of art is its capacity to extend sympathy by "surpris[ing] even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from the themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment" (270). Flooding is also the metaphor undergirding Lewes' descriptions of sensations diffusive enough to overflow established neural channels.

at the cost of sympathy's strength and efficacy. Deronda's powers of reflection stimulate his sympathy into hyperactivity; always ready to try to imagine the other's point of view, Deronda becomes too detached, too critically distant from his own subject-position. He finds himself trapped in the endlessly reflective position of the critic, his "many-sided sympathy...hinder[ing] any persistent course of action" (364). Deronda's limbo rehearses the crisis of virility common to mid-Victorian liberalism, animated by fears that many-sidedness might sap vigor, but in addition to undermining his agency, Deronda's hyperactive sympathy initiates a crisis of feeling. The fluidity with which Deronda can imaginatively move between different subject positions empties those positions of their specific content. His powers of sympathetic reflection thus present him with the challenge of finding "some way of keeping emotion and its progeny of sentiments...substantial and strong in the face of a reflectiveness that threatened to nullify all differences" (365). Locked in a feedback loop with his reflectiveness, Deronda's sympathy undoes, or "neutralizes" itself by rendering different points of view (as he imagines them) so easily and glibly inhabitable that they lose their distinctiveness, and thus also the particularity that, for Eliot, must always accompany emotion. His sympathy precipitates Deronda's fall into a "meditative numbness" because it has become a version of what Amanda Anderson calls "false universalism." In Anderson's reading of *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot is attempting to negotiate a stance between a hyper-modern false universalism and a hide-bound and monological nationalism. The middle way embraced by the novel is a "cultivated partiality," a reflective affirmation of a community grounded in tradition but open to reform. Anderson describes this mode of allegiance as "passionate argumentation" (321). Passionate argumentation nicely evokes the combination of feeling and criticism at work in Eliot's political ideal, but Anderson's reading focuses primarily on establishing the importance of critical distance to Eliot's nationalist

project, and leaves largely unexplored the dynamic of passion and argumentation integral to this project. Here, I will complicate Anderson's reading by shifting the focus slightly to read *Daniel Deronda* in the context of the "feeling...mixed with criticism"(*Daniel Deronda* 178) that constitutes the privileged mode of agency for Eliot. Attention to this dynamic will allow for a fuller portrait of reflective agency in Eliot's writing, as well as provide needed nuance to the terms of Anderson's analysis insofar as feeling and criticism were becoming more and more politically freighted during the 1870s in ways that brought pressure to bear on Eliot's model of sympathetic reflectiveness.

Some of that political freight is evident in the passages describing Deronda's crisis of feeling. Deronda initially seems simply to share the innate balance between liberal and conservative impulses that, notwithstanding its hampering of directed action on Deronda's part, defines Eliot's political ideal of liberal traditionalism. Here too, however, the balance seems to be tipped by Deronda's hyperactive reflectiveness, which attenuates feeling by obliterating the traditions that properly facilitate it. Deronda's crisis of feeling therefore has an explicit political dimension: "To pound the objects of sentiment into small dust, yet keep sentiment alive and active was something like the famous recipe for making cannon—to first take a round hole and then enclose it with iron; whatever you do keeping fast hold of your round hole. Yet how distinguish what our will may wisely save in its completeness, from the heaping of cat-mummies and the expensive cult of enshrined putrefactions?" (365). The necessity Deronda seems to be under to find a proper, cooperative balance between a critical reflectiveness that undermines tradition and a "practically energetic sentiment" energized by an attachment to tradition rehearses the problem of culture as Arnold articulates it in *Culture and Anarchy*. For Arnold, too, culture depends on a balance (in his case not necessarily simultaneous) between Hellenism, the faculty of critical

reflection, and Hebraism, the faculty for feeling and acting. In the passages above, Eliot seems to suggest, contrary to Arnold, that England's young men have more need to cultivate practically energetic sentiment than they do a disinterested reflectiveness that, in *Deronda's* case, has become worryingly hypertrophied. As Terry Eagleton quips, in *Daniel Deronda*, the novel's hero moves from Hellenism to Hebraism, literally (*The English Novel* 183).

Along with Arnold's influential work, other elements of *Daniel Deronda's* social and discursive context troubled the smooth cooperation of feeling and reflection at work in sympathy for Eliot. Chief among these were the changes in the political landscape of England that were making old alliances untenable. Writing in 1869, in the wake of the 1868 Liberal electoral triumph, Arnold's insistence on the need for more devotion to disinterested criticism was in keeping with the focus on reform during the first Gladstone ministry. By the mid-1870s, when Eliot wrote *Daniel Deronda*, Gladstone's reforms had created fractures in the Liberal coalition that led to a Tory resurgence in 1874. David Wayne Thomas identifies one of the major faultlines in the Liberal coalition as a conflict over the status of law, in which working-class populists responded to interventionist reforms by grounding certain rights as natural and therefore as possessing "a kind of impunity from interrogation through the traditional authority of the natural" (116). Where these conflicts occurred, as in the Tichborne case that Thomas analyzes, Victorian liberals tended to dismiss working-class positions as reflecting merely the working class' lack of "trained intellect." Unable to make considered judgments, they charged, working class subjects could only be guided in their convictions by "mere feeling" (100). The likely effect of these conflicts within liberal discourse was, then, to harden already

sharpening divisions between liberal reflectiveness and a traditionalism whose dominant mode was feeling rather than reason.²³

This hardening opposition between reflection and feeling rendered Eliot's regulative ideal of reflective sympathy untenable, leaving Deronda in the peculiar situation of finding that his sympathy neutralizes itself. This is a dilemma the novel seeks to resolve through the revelation of Deronda's Jewish parentage. This discovery frees his judgment from its "wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy," and makes it possible for him to "choos[e]...the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical" over "that bird's-eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality" (745). Impartial sympathy, then, not only attenuates feeling through a critical distance flattening out distinctions, but also endangers volition by making choice impossible. Deronda's wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy echoes Gwendolen's predicament when, constrained by her family's fall in fortune and her legal status as a married woman and unable to determine any action that might mitigate the oppressiveness of her marriage with Grandcourt, she feels similarly condemned to wander over and over again through a "labyrinth of reflection, in which already the same succession of prospects had been repeated [and] the same fallacious outlets rejected" (602).

Gwendolen, the "spoiled child," hardly seems like she shares Deronda's sensitive, impartial sympathy, and her cowed and terrorized position as Grandcourt's wife is, the title of Book IV informs us, "Gwendolen Get[ting] Her Choice." Yet despite the fact that she initially seems so decidedly unsympathetic, Gwendolen's yearning to gratify her "many-sided self" through the "reflected" pleasure of others'

²³ See Thomas, 82-117. This simple binary was complicated by class positions, as I noted in the section on Lewes. Working-class feeling is not, like Arnold's middle-class Hebraism, reliably anchored to tradition, but reflects the widespread Victorian characterization of the working-classes as unable to police their own desires and feelings and therefore as hopelessly immersed in the chaotic, undirected stream of their own sensations.

admiration is merely the bad, self-centered version of sympathetic self-objectification (586, 39). Her “choice” to accept Grandcourt is less a deliberate decision than an attempt to put off decision, made first and foremost simply by declining to send Grandcourt away. Though this deferral does not constitute a deliberate choice, it is the result of deliberation. It is an effect of Gwendolen’s attempt, prompted by worldly motives, to “reason and balance” about the possible marriage against her earlier resolve to refuse it that had, after the revelation of Grandcourt’s illegitimate family, come “as the undoubting movement of her whole being” (311). While she thus seems to herself to be, like Maggie Tulliver, *drifting* towards a decision, Gwendolen’s drifting is the result of her reflective hesitation, rather than its absence. As the narrator remarks, “drifting depends on something besides the currents, when the sails have been set beforehand” (303).

Gwendolen’s reflective hesitation condemns her to a form of mental wandering in the labyrinths of reflection whose dominant quality is its repetitiveness. Once she is unhappily married, she finds herself locked into an endless and impossible search for escapes in which “day after day the same pattern of thinking was repeated. There came nothing to change the situation—no new elements in the sketch—only a recurrence which engraved it” (604). Eliot here describes this reflectiveness that recurs without resolving itself into purposeful action by using a trope that itself recurs over and over again throughout *Daniel Deronda*: neural engraving or inscription. Here, the engraving of Gwendolen’s pattern of reflection evokes the mechanistic determinism that attended the overinscription of neural pathways in Lewes’s physiology and *The Mill on the Floss*. The effect of this form of repetition in the novel is the creation of what Nicholas Dames calls alienated agency, “an activity so automatic that execution seems to take place outside the self, in some fully externalized space where the issue is less remembrance than preconscious reiteration”

(151). In *Daniel Deronda*, however, the repetition that engraves a thought, feeling, or desire can intensify, rather than just attenuate, feeling. For instance, Deronda's advice to Gwendolen about channeling her fear into a dread of remorse recurs over and over again in her thought until, under her growing temptation to kill Grandcourt, his words gather such intensity that they seem "like a writing of fire within" (695). Mordecai is aiming for a similar effect in his attempt to engrave his writing within Jacob Cohen. Despite the fact that the words Jacob memorizes are "unintelligible" to him, Mordecai is undeterred, heartening himself with the possibility that "my words may rule him some day. Their meaning may flash out on him. It is so with a nation—after many days"(476). Mordecai hopes that Jacob's initial insensibility to the meaning of his poetry will disappear in a flash of insight that closely resembles the surprise of sympathetic understanding in *The Mill on the Floss*, but meaning in Mordecai's sense is both more univocal and more authoritarian. For Jacob, sympathy with Mordecai, an understanding of his meaning, would leave him as dumbstruck and little able to question as Tom Tulliver.

While impartial sympathy undermines choice by endlessly deferring it, Mordecai is ultimately contented to do without choice altogether as long as he can create in Jacob a univocal sympathy with the text that has been engraved in him.²⁴ Mordecai, moreover, consistently figures the reinvigoration of national consciousness through this trope of neural writing. In the poem he teaches Jacob, the national

²⁴ In his speech at the Philosophy Club, Mordecai does privilege choice and resolute action as the "divine principle" of his race, and his emphasis on feeling and style of "emotive argument" would seem to offer a template for the "passionate argumentation" that the novel endorses as the ideal mode of collective belonging. In Mordecai's Zionist project, however, choice is a one-time event, occurring only when an agent decides to embrace Zionism or to try to fade away through assimilation; choice does not serve as the basis for the continual negotiations of consent necessary for Deronda's more dialogic civic ideal. There is a similar dynamic at work in sympathy for Mordecai, who is, according to the narrator, "free...from the self-consciousness that has reference to others' approbation"(399-400). This may seem like an admirable quality compared with Gwendolen's love of the reflected pleasure of admiration, but to be so utterly indifferent to others' approbation is also, within the theory of sympathy Eliot adapts from Smith, to refuse the critical reflection on one's own acts—otherwise known as conscience—made possible by sympathy. For Mordecai, in other words, sympathy is a one-way street.

consciousness hibernating in the breasts of diasporic Jews is a “buried ark,” each heart a tomb in which the “Law lies graven,” waiting for revivification (477). This text engraved in the hearts of diasporic Jews is, according to Mordecai, the “heritage of Israel,” a racial inheritance that “lives in their veins as a power without understanding, like the morning exultation of herds; it is the inborn half of memory, moving as in a dream among writings on the walls, which it sees dimly but cannot divide into speech” (536). In Mordecai’s Zionist project, Jews must articulate this writing and achieve an understanding of its meaning, which is, finally, a sentiment or feeling of collective belonging. The meaning of racial inheritance here is thus, as Deronda thinks during his visit to the Frankfurt synagogue, “the sense of communion in a form,” a sense that is “independent of detailed verbal meaning” (367). Deronda makes his visit to the synagogue before he learns of his parentage, and his powerful affective response to the Hebrew liturgy whose specific content and separate parts are completely opaque to him confirms Mordecai’s description of a Jewish inheritance that is, physiologically speaking, engraved within the nerves. This model of Jewish inheritance, however, seems to render choice moot; if collective belonging is written into the nerves, then one might say of Jewish national identity that, like Mirah’s religion, it is “of one fibre with [the] affections...never present[ing] itself as a series of propositions” (363).

In contrast to Mordecai, Eliot attempts to preserve the freedom of choice within an open-ended racial inheritance by re-asserting some subjective agency within an inherited sensibility. Cynthia Chase has famously argued that Deronda’s “choice” to embrace Judaism is a mystified illusion insofar as the formal and interpretive mechanics of narrative render it a foregone conclusion long before the moment of decision arrives. Anderson faults this reading for its inattention to the reflective

dialogism through which Deronda constructs his national identity.²⁵ My own reading is closer to Anderson's, but I suggest that her analysis is incomplete without attention to the way Eliot attempts to construct, on the basis of Lewes' physiological theory of inherited neural pathways, a model of open-ended racial identity based on the inheritance of sensibility. Deronda himself figures his awakening to his national identity in these terms:

Suppose the stolen offspring of some mountain tribe brought up in a city of the plain, or one with an inherited genius for painting, and born blind— the ancestral life would lie within them as a dim longing for unknown objects and sensations, and the spell-bound habit of their inherited frames would be like a cunningly-wrought musical instrument, never played on, but quivering throughout in uneasy mysterious meanings of its intricate structure that, under the right touch, gives music. Something like that, I think, has been my experience. (750)

Deronda here figures his neural inheritance as a habit of feeling. "Habit" in Victorian Britain denoted both bodily constitution and a settled tendency, practice, or custom to act in a certain way, usually "acquired by frequent repetition of the same act until it becomes almost or quite involuntary" (OED). A habit is an act of uncertain volition, but since a habit can be broken or altered, it allows for the exertion of conscious will where Mordecai's insistence on being ruled by inherited feeling does not.

The text of *Daniel Deronda* is laced with habits; the word itself appears with almost obsessive recurrence in the novel. Habit not only plays a crucial role in the

²⁵ See Chase, 215-227 and Anderson, 132. Dames praises Chase's article for its sensitivity to the novel's temporal contortions—the "present causes of past effects"—, which he attributes to the "confrontation of an inescapably temporal procedure (elongated narrative) and an extra-temporal fact (racial and religious identity)"(155). However, if racial identity for Eliot is, as I argue below, primarily a matter of habits of feeling, then racial identity is not extra-temporal, but requires progressively refined, and altered, repetitions.

novel's theorization of racial inheritance, it is also, relatedly, the novel's preferred method for regulating feeling. Describing Grandcourt's "intermittent, flickering" passions, the narrator remarks that his obstinately willful caprices may be due to "the want of regulated channels for the soul to move in—good and sufficient ducts of habit without which our nature easily turn to mere ooze and mud, and at any pressure yields nothing but a spurt or a puddle" (156-7). "Ducts of habit" evokes the defined neural channels that conduct feeling and direct action, and suggests the importance of habit in regulating the flow between inward-directed feeling and outward-directed action. Unlike in Lewes' physiology, where the absence of established channels allows the nervous system to be overwhelmed by massive and uncontrolled sensation, Grandcourt's lack of habits to regulate feeling seems to render him incapable of feeling. His passions are intermittent and his effect on others is "benumbing"—his "negative mind," Gwendolen feels, is "as diffusive as fog, clinging to all objects and spoiling all contact" (587). Yet Grandcourt's negative mind works a transformation in his character comparable to the effects of uncontrollable feeling by making him so unpredictable that "there was no telling what might turn up in the slowly churning chances of his mind" (157). The narrator observes that "the navy waking from sleep and without malice heaving a stone to crush the life out of his still sleeping comrade, is understood to lack the trained motive which makes a character fairly calculable in its actions; but by a roundabout course even a gentleman may make of himself a chancy personage" (319). In juxtaposing the navy with the probable peer, Eliot draws from an available middle-class Victorian discourse in which the aristocrat and the proletarian share a similarly troubling relation to the modern—their unregulated feelings and desires are anarchic and associated with ooze and mud, figures of dissolution that are European master-tropes for the experience of modernity.²⁶ But in

²⁶ That the middle-class discursively deployed their regulated sexuality, as a defining aspect of

her emphasis on the absence in both cases of “trained motive,” Eliot is purposefully revising the phrase “trained intellect,” a key term in the debates leading up to and succeeding the passage of the Second Reform Bill in 1867.

The extension of the franchise to more working-class men mandated in the Second Reform Bill reenergized the longstanding middle-class discussions of and projects for the education of Britain’s working classes. Now that Britain’s lower orders had won a say in their own government, many in the middle and upper classes looked out on the roughly one million new voters and came to the conclusion expressed in the remark popularly attributed to MP Robert Lowe: “we must now educate our new masters.” The goal of this education was to cultivate the “trained intellect” necessary for responsible political decision-making. In the mind of Walter Bagehot, for instance, many of the newly enfranchised working men lacked trained intellect, and as a result they “[gave] anything that fasten[ed] on their emotions an altogether disproportionate significance” (“The Orton Demonstrations” 391). In *Daniel Deronda*, trained intellect has become trained motive, and the intellect doesn’t stand opposed to and control potentially unruly emotion; rather, feelings, by being habitually exercised, regulate themselves.

Indeed, habitual feelings actually regulate thought in the novel. The pattern of thinking that recurs until it engraves itself in Gwendolen’s mind beats such a relentless tattoo because it is “bound up with [her] passion.” Because this pattern of thought is habitually stimulated by the shame, remorse, and anger that she feels over her marriage, “everything [becomes] porous to it—bows, smiles, conversation, repartee are mere honeycombs where such thought rushes freely” (602). Habitual feeling is

women’s domestic authority especially, against first the aristocracy and then the working classes in the fight for political hegemony is a major strand of Nancy Armstrong’s argument in her work on sexuality, politics, and the novel. Armstrong is focused on sexuality, and hence misses the ways in which feelings and sensibility generally, not just sexual drives, is at issue in these contests. See Armstrong, 59-95 and 161-202.

thus closely connected to those moments in the novel when Eliot seems to approach something like a concept of the unconscious, as when she famously describes Gwendolen's continually recurring thoughts as "mov[ing] within her like ghosts, making no break in her more acknowledged consciousness and finding no obstruction in it: dark rays doing their work invisibly in the broad light" (606). In this respect, habitual feeling is a form of what Dames calls "alienated agency." But habits of feeling are also potential objects of cultivation, as Deronda takes for granted in the advice he gives Gwendolen, advice that she repeats until it, too, becomes a kind of habit. Recommending that she engage in "fixed meditation" to make acts that would add to her remorse the object of her fear and dread, Deronda explains that "we are not always in a state of strong emotion, and when we are calm we can use our memories and gradually change the bias of our fear, as we do our tastes... Try to take hold of your sensibility, and use it as if it were a faculty, like vision" (452). To take hold of "habitual emotion" (453) as if it were a faculty is a project of cultivation that, Deronda here recognizes, bears broad similarities with projects of aesthetic education that proliferated in the nineteenth century.

Daniel Deronda itself offers its readers a peculiar version of aesthetic education, according to Nicholas Dames, who argues that, in Eliot's understanding, the novel's elongated form "school[s] its readers in the experience of duration." Eliot uses the patient experience of duration, what Dames calls the "full, deliberate consciousness" of the passage of time, as the basis for a "political/religious ethic of lastingness," a practice of adhering to and maintaining traditions and customary institutions (164, 161). In Dames' argument, the novel teaches its readers to experience duration, to wait, by subjecting them to its extended narrative form—a form so elongated and capacious that Eliot herself seemed to worry that it might induce boredom and irritation and defy comprehension. To aid memory and

comprehension under the strenuous conditions of extended reading, Eliot, drawing from Wagner, incorporates in her narrative motivic elements, repetitions of symbolic objects, significant gestures, or lines of text. If, as Dames argues, these motivic repetitions throughout the novel are Eliot's means of jogging readers' memories and prompting them to connect dispersed events and moments in the novel, her repetitions are also means for structuring readerly affect.²⁷ In other words, the repetitions that are so salient in the text of the novel are, like the repetitions that engrave feelings within the novel's characters, likewise a means of cultivating habits of feeling in its readers.

The participation of *Daniel Deronda* in a project of cultivating habits of feeling that resembles Mordecai's "engraving" his poem in Jacob Cohen raises questions about the place of agency and consent in the reading and writing of the novel. Does the novel itself cultivate only an alienated agency, the unwilling repetition of emotion, in its readers? The danger to agency entailed by the novel's repetitions, moreover, cuts both ways, applying to the author as well as the reader. In the writing of the novel Eliot herself was subject to what Dames calls "a habit of verbatim reiteration," whose excessiveness was so widely complained of and puzzled over in reviews of the 1876 serial edition that, embarrassed, she felt compelled to delete some of them for the 1878 Cabinet edition.²⁸ Beyond the specific instance of *Deronda*, Eliot's comments on form in art, from a set of her notes dated 1868, suggest that poetic form itself is the product of habits of feeling. There, she writes that "emotion, by its tendency to repetition, i.e. rhythmic persistence in proportion as diversifying thought is absent, creates a form by its recurrence in adjustment with certain given

²⁷ Such an effect would be consistent with Eliot's understanding of poetic form as both determined by the sequence of emotions in the poet and as expressing—that is, transmitting to an auditor/reader—that sequence of emotions. Note that Eliot uses "poetic" here to denote the literary in general. See "Notes on Form in Art," 433-4.

²⁸ The most famous of these reviews is by Henry James, who pointed out the obsessive recurrence of gestural tics in the novel, but James was far from alone in noting the novel's stylistic peculiarities. See Dames, 161, 124.

conditions of sound, language, action, or environment” (“Notes on Form in Art” 435). While poetic form thus seems to emerge spontaneously and unreflectively, through the repetition of feeling in the absence of “diversifying thought,” Eliot insists that the poet exercises reflective choice in the combination of elements—images, rhythms, tones, etc.—as the “accordant expression” of the repeating emotional state. Literary form is thus for Eliot the product of reflection and feeling, deliberation and spontaneity, “diversifying thought” and emotional repetition.²⁹

By the mid 1870s when she wrote *Deronda*, however, Eliot was sure of neither the efficacy or the stability of this cooperation of feeling and thought in poetic production. Her uncertainty is crystallized in the novel’s treatment of Deronda’s mother, the Princess Leonora Halm-Elberstein, who has long and often been recognized as a surrogate for Eliot herself. Like Eliot as she theorizes her own method of composition, Leonora’s artistic talents are expressed as a combination of spontaneous feeling and its conscious expression that Eliot, in a famous passage, describes as “a form of sincere acting.” “This woman’s nature,” Eliot writes, “was one in which all feeling...immediately became matter of conscious representation: experience immediately passed into drama, and she acted her own emotions...It would not be true to say that she felt less because of this double consciousness: she felt—that is, her mind went through—all the more, but with a difference; each nucleus of pain or pleasure had a deep atmosphere of the excitement or spiritual intoxication which at once exalts and deadens” (629). Sincere acting is an easily recognizable version of poetic production; by immediately casting her feelings into conscious representations, Leonora is constantly formalizing her own emotional experience. In Leonora’s case,

²⁹ It is also subject to a trajectory similar to that of pathways of feeling in Lewes’ physiology: poetic form begins with the repetition and gradual definition of a feeling or emotional state, but through continued repetition, it is “starved into an ingenious pattern-work, in which tricks with vocables take the place of living words fed with the blood of relevant meaning, & made musical by the continual intercommunication of sensibility & thought” (436).

however, her sincere acting is described as a “double consciousness,” which suggests not a cooperative activity but merely simultaneous or adjacent ones.

A widely discussed and debated phenomenon in nineteenth-century psychology, “double consciousness” denotes a condition akin to dissociative identity disorder, in which two or more separate and independent consciousnesses exist within the same person.³⁰ Leonora’s sudden shifts in manner and mood during her meeting with Deronda make plain that she is indeed experiencing double consciousness in this sense; marveling at one such display of volatility, the narrator remarks that “it was as if her mind were breaking into several, one jarring the other into impulsive action” (636). This psychic fragmentation springs, fundamentally, from the double consciousness of her sincere acting, which splits Leonora’s psyche along the fault line between her spontaneous, emotional experience and her conscious, reflective representation of that experience. This split runs parallel, moreover, to the fracturing of Leonora’s identity between her choice of an assimilated, cosmopolitan life and her identity as a Jewish woman that remains inscribed within her sensibility. Both Leonora and Deronda describe this choice as, first and foremost, an act of will, which in the novel’s psychological lexicon is already implicitly aligned with negation and opposed to the “motives” that are properly the expression of regulated feeling. As with Grandcourt, whose benumbing, negative mind transformed him into a version of the working class navy lacking “trained motive,” Leonora’s choice to negate her racial and gender identity in order to live “the myriad lives in one” (626) of a

³⁰ Double consciousness is best known today from W.E.B. Du Bois’ influential use of the concept to theorize the effects of African-Americans’ oppressive marginalization in white-dominated U.S. society and culture, but the term was in extensive use in 19th century psychology from at least 1817. For Du Bois, as well as for Eliot, double consciousness is primarily a condition of self-alienation. See Du Bois, 194, and Bruce, 303. In Eliot’s own work, double consciousness plays a significant role in *The Lifted Veil*. There, Latimer uses it to describe his experience of second sight and especially to figure the contest between his passion for Bertha and his telepathic insight into her “barren, selfish soul,” a contest he compares to a conflict between impulses and ideas.

professional actress similarly consigns her to the chanciness of a disintegrated stream of sensation, unstructured by habit. Leonora's adherence to her own will in defiance of her gendered and racialized habit, in other words, produces a double consciousness that undermines her capacity for volition and fragments her consciousness so thoroughly that her illness seems nothing less than a literalization of her psychic disintegration.³¹

As a result of this convergence of the effects of unregulated feeling and attenuated feeling, the compulsive repetitions of alienated agency appear within the chanciness and fragmentation of unregulated feeling. As Leonora's psychic and physical disintegration worsen, the capacity for resistance that defined her act of will bleeds away. As a result, her suppressed identity re-emerges as a "strange coercion," a text from which she "quot[es] unwillingly" that, in a rehearsal of Gwendolen's own repetition compulsion, "make[s] ghosts upon the daylight" (632, 662, 636). Even before her illness weakens her capacity for resistance, however, Leonora's double consciousness already presages this later moment insofar as the division in her consciousness makes even her willful acts of "conscious representation" seem less under her control and so closer to a form of alienated agency. In this respect, then, Leonora, Deronda's bad Jewish mother, resembles Lapidoth, Mordecai's and Mirah's deadbeat Jewish father, whose compulsive gambling and unregulated chanciness are, obviously, intertwined. Lapidoth likewise possesses an enhanced mimetic ability, but he seems even more detached from the feelings he represents than Leonora. He recalls the family he abandoned, for example, with "an unemotional memory, which was like the ocular perception of a touch to one who has lost the sense of touch, or like morsels

³¹ Anderson reads Leonora as, due to her gender, the novel's limit-case for Deronda's ideal of reflective dialogism: "if raised to a higher level of consistency [consonant with this ideal of critical pluralism], Eliot's project should be better able to accommodate Leonora's enactment of postconventionality" (143). Eliot's commitment to reflective dialogism in *Daniel Deronda* is, however, grounded in a theory of race that simply cannot accommodate Leonora's repudiation of her Jewish identity.

on an untasting palate, having shape and grain, but no flavor” (742). Yet Lapidoth combines this detached cunning with not only the compulsive repetitions of his gambling habit, but also with “hysterical excitability,” a medicalized condition that condenses manifold Victorian anxieties about unregulated feeling (777).

Neil Hertz has noted many of the parallels drawn in *Daniel Deronda* between Leonora, Grandcourt, Gwendolen, Lapidoth, and the novel’s author George Eliot through moments in which each suffers from irreducibly indeterminate relations to compulsive repetition, feeling, and agency. Hertz argues that these moments are the effect of “the neutral”—the ground on which signifying oppositions deploy themselves, the original gap or emptiness between signifier and signified and between ego and object that allows for entry into the symbolic (112-137). Hertz’s reading is rich and suggestive, but his psychoanalytic framework excludes attention to how the entanglements and parallels he notes are discursively determined by the overlapping political, philosophical, and physiological contexts within which Eliot’s novel elaborates the relations between feeling, agency, and compulsive repetition.

We have seen how Eliot’s 1860 novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, endorses an ethical practice of sympathy that is a kind of critical feeling. Sympathy in *The Mill on the Floss* is a practice of attempting to feel what one imagines the other feels, a practice which therefore entails the reflective dialogism of recognizing the possibility of multiple and indeterminate meanings. Since sympathy is thus open to a dialogism of feeling, it also prevents a routinization of feeling that attenuates it and compromises agency by rendering thoughts and feelings automatic. By the mid 1870s, when Eliot wrote *Daniel Deronda*, troubling features had emerged in her regulative ideal of sympathy. Developments within Victorian critical and political discourse, influenced especially by Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, and by the passage of the Second Reform Bill in 1867 and the 1868 triumph and 1874 defeat of the first Gladstone

ministry, had stiffened the opposition between reflection and feeling, and loaded the two terms with heavier political associations. Partly as a result of these developments, sympathy in Eliot's last novel has become "impartial sympathy"; from a mode of critical feeling, sympathy has devolved into merely a mode of being critical. Closely aligned with abstraction, impartial sympathy in *Deronda* creates a shifting of perspective so fluid and glib that it threatens to "nullify all differences," and thereby to undermine feeling. To head off this threat and salvage her liberal traditionalism, Eliot attempts in her last novel to ground sympathy and feeling in habit. Whereas the figuring of the sympathetic consciousness as a palimpsest stresses openness to the potential re-writing of feelings, the emphasis on habits of feeling in *Deronda* calls attention to the difficulty, the necessary repetitions, that must go into such re-inscriptions. To describe a feeling as a habit, moreover, stresses the more ambiguous role of volition in its experience. A habit can be cultivated, a feeling can be employed "as if it were a faculty," but the effort required to reshape or alter an act whose performance has become involuntary guarantees cultural continuity due to the gradual pace of any reforms based on such a project of cultivation. Moreover, Eliot's habits of feeling are doubly resistant to rapid change because, for Eliot, such habits are the modes of feeling written in the neural pathways that one inherits. Habits of feeling are a form of racial identity.

As James Buzard has recently argued, Eliot's privileging of racial inheritance in *Daniel Deronda* sets the limits to the novel's affirmation of criticism and negotiated consent as integral to national belonging. In Buzard's reading, however, Eliot's novel privileges race in distinction from culture, which he assumes is more amenable to criticism and reform and therefore less stable: "Only in the always already-vanishing traditional rural community do ethnicity and acculturation—blood and habit—supposedly go hand in hand and do not even have to be distinguished from one

another. Self-consciously mobile groups...have a greater need to privilege race over culture as the defining element of group identity” (296). In fact, Eliot’s novel seeks conceptually to rejoin blood with habit in its elaboration of habits of feeling as racial inheritance.

Although habits of feeling are cultivated in *Daniel Deronda*, they nonetheless overlap with other forms of alienated agency that are linked to the attenuation of feeling in Lewes’ physiology and in *The Mill on the Floss*. In a sense, *Deronda*’s habits of feeling are a reconfiguration and partial reversal of the gambit for agency Lewes figures in the “vigorous thinker.” Vigorous thinking seeks to preserve agency by sacrificing precision in feeling and acting in order to keep them from becoming so routinized that their performance becomes involuntary. Eliot’s inherited habits of feeling, on the other hand, give up agency and control in order to preserve traditions and the feelings attaching to them from a reflectiveness that neutralizes feeling and cannot resolve itself into decision or action. Yet the involuntary performance of actions or feelings that constitutes a habit is, in Lewes’ work, directly linked to the attenuation of feeling through its greater and greater restriction and frictionless flow through the neural channels that repetition inscribes ever more deeply in the nervous system. In physiological terms, the longer a habit of feeling is repeated, the longer, that is, a feeling is a habit, the more the strength of that feeling dissipates. A habit of feeling, even one that comprises the most cherished tradition, would thus lose its vigor by dint of repetition, implying the physiological necessity for the gradual alteration of habits through projects of cultivation. This element of contradiction nonetheless seems to unsettle *Daniel Deronda*, and perhaps motivates Eliot’s treatment of Leonora, and especially Lapidoth, as bad Others in the novel. Both combine versions of a critical detachment from feeling borne of mimetic ability with habits—the compulsive and involuntary repetitions of gambling and the performance of

emotion—that undermine each character’s capacity for feeling. Eliot’s preoccupation with the question of how to preserve the vigor of a feeling or tradition from being blunted by repetition extends to the form of the novel as well. As we have seen, the formal repetitions, I am tempted to call them habits of composition, that critics found so peculiar in *Daniel Deronda* raise questions about the reader’s relationship to these repeated emotional cues as well as about the degree of volition and the intensity of feeling involved in poetic production for the author, namely George Eliot. That Eliot’s own theory of poetic production called for a sentimental effort—comprised of spontaneous emotion and deliberate reflection—that has in *Daniel Deronda* become a form of double consciousness suggests that, by the mid 1870s, these are questions that had become harder for her to answer.

CHAPTER 3
READING IN THE DARK:
SENSORY PERCEPTION AND AGENCY IN *THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE*

Let a person enter his room in the dark and grope among the objects there. The touch of the matches will instantaneously recall their appearance. If his hand comes in contact with an orange on the table, the golden yellow of the fruit, its savor and perfume will forthwith shoot through his mind. In passing the hand over the sideboard or in jogging the coal-scuttle with the foot, the large glossy dark shape of the one and the irregular blackness of the other awaken like a flash and constitute what we call the recognition of the objects. The voice of the violin faintly echoes through the mind as the hand is laid upon it in the dark, and the feeling of the garments or draperies which may hang about the room is not understood till the look correlative to the feeling has in each case been resuscitated.

—William James, *The Principles of Psychology*

When Thomas Hardy decided to stop writing novels in the 1890s, he blamed his readers. Reflecting on the notorious charges made by Mowbray Morris in *The Quarterly Review* that *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was a “clumsy sordid tale of boorish brutality and lust,” Hardy remarked in a private note: “How strange that one may write a book without knowing what one puts into it—or rather, the reader reads into it! Well, if this sort of thing continues no more novel-writing for me. A man must be a fool to deliberately stand up to be shot at” (*Life and Work*, 259). This note has helped shape a critical mythology in which Hardy, a daring liberal crusader against unjust social conventions, is hounded out of fiction-writing by the hypocritically prurient over-

interpretations of late Victorian readers.³² Among other things, this mythology obscures the fact that both long before and long after the scandals occasioned by *Tess* and *Jude*, Hardy's writings betray a persistent unease about reading, often representing it as a solipsistic and unethical act. This is especially true of Hardy's 1878 novel, *The Return of the Native*. Consider, for example, the disastrous *mésalliances* that comprise the plot of that novel. Bad marriages are thoroughly typical of Hardy's fiction, but in *The Return of the Native* they are directly precipitated by acts of reading. Characters in that novel read each other, each regarding the other's face "not as a picture, but...as a page," and in doing so they misread each other, with catastrophic results (167). The novel represents these acts of reading as forms of prosopopoeia, prefiguring Hardy's later complaint that, in the furor over *Jude the Obscure*, "he underwent the strange experience of beholding a sinister lay figure of himself constructed by [readers and reviewers], which had no sort of resemblance to him as he was."³³ Yet the characters' acts of reading in *The Return of the Native* also rehearse the instance of prosopopoeia—literally, to make a face—that famously opens that novel, in which the narrator figures Egdon Heath as "a face on which time makes but little impression" (9). The novel suggests that the capacity for such acts of prosopopoeia, for treating phenomena as figures, is the defining characteristic of "the more thinking among mankind," a group in which Hardy, naturally, included himself (11).

The Return of the Native thus depicts reading as at once an empowering mode of understanding and a solipsistic mode of appropriating or misinterpreting others.

³² Dale Kramer, for example, cites the note as evidence for his claim, in agreement with Hardy's biographers, that "it is quite likely that...Hardy dedicated himself to *Jude* with the idea that this would be his last novel, and with every intention of having his full say in defiance of the convention-ridden reviewers who refused his fictional characters the kind of sympathy and tolerance that in most cases they would have granted their personal acquaintances." See Kramer, 165.

³³ See *Life and Work*, 288. Hardy's autobiography was originally presented as a biography written by his wife, Florence. Therefore, Hardy refers to himself in the third-person throughout, except in the reprinted personal notes.

The novel's most emblematic reader in this regard is Clym, whose combination of insight and fatal misunderstanding is literalized, in Hardy's terms, when he goes blind from reading too much. Reading and blindness. For Hardy, they imply one another, but not strictly as cause and effect. Hardy's novel suggests that blindness is the effect of the inevitably partial and self-serving character of reading and, at the same time, the state that makes possible its interpretive activities.³⁴ Reading is a narrowly focalized mode of perception in *The Return of the Native*. Its concentrated cognitive activity depends on the subject's ability to block out a larger field of stimuli. Hardy figures this mental act of inattention required by reading as a mode of sensory deprivation whose most emblematic form is blindness. Hence, Clym's blindness is not only the consequence of reading but its precondition. Clym blinds himself not just by reading per se but, quite specifically, by reading in the dark.

The blindness of reading in *The Return of the Native* signals Hardy's debt to late Victorian cognitive science, particularly to associationist psychology. The fundamental tenet of the school was that any given idea or sensation automatically recalls to the mind other ideas and sensations connected to it by similarity and temporal or spatial contiguity. Associationists held that all objects are bundles of contiguously experienced sensations, and that each sensation in the bundle, if experienced in isolation, stimulates the memory of its partners. Association thus

³⁴ Hardy's allegory of reading in *The Return of the Native* anticipates many of the arguments in Paul de Man's "The Rhetoric of Blindness." Like Hardy, de Man argues that reading is made possible by a form of blindness. For de Man, this blindness is a confused or mystified attribution of presence—of literal meaning or authorial intention—to a literary text, the language of which is defined first of all by its rhetoricity, its figurative mode and discontinuity with a grounding authorial consciousness. This blindness is not only inevitable (at least to an extent) but enabling for the critical reader, who anchors her critical interpretations by composing an authorial intending subject standing behind the text. Thus the blindness of de Man's reader, like the blindness of Hardy's, operates partly through an uncritical act of prosopopoeia that nonetheless opens up the possibility of critical interpretive work. As I shall argue below, however, Hardy is even more radical than de Man in that, while de Man is elaborating a literary semiotics, Hardy's novels and essays elaborate a semiotic phenomenology. In other words, while these conditions of blindness and insight apply exclusively to (especially literary) language for de Man, for Hardy they apply to language and sense perception alike. See de Man, 102-141.

transforms the entire field of objects into sensory signs, and perception itself into a mode of cognition analogous to reading.³⁵ William James, for example, illustrates in my epigraph the principle that any given sensation serves as a sign for its associates (James 555-6). The recognitions James describes there are instances of metonymic association—the recollection of the sensations that are usually experienced alongside the signifying sensation. Early associationists, such as Hartley and James Mill, tended to emphasize contiguous association to the exclusion of association via resemblance. Led in part by the challenges to conventional concepts of cognitive agency in the burgeoning fields of physiology and experimental psychology, James and other late Victorian theorists of association shifted focus back to association via resemblance as the basis for a new psycho-physiological account of agency. Operating through metaphoric leaps from the signifying sensation to others with which that sensation is less routinely linked, metaphoric association for these theorists became the means of an interpretive re-envisioning of experience, a way of breaking up and transfiguring the routinized perceptions of contiguous association.

Hardy's novels and critical essays demonstrate an intense interest in these psycho-physiological theories and an abiding investment in a similar model of cognitive agency. *The Return of the Native* suggests that blindness—or any other condition that obscures the sensations by which objects are routinely perceived—can stimulate the imaginative re-interpretation of experience that associationists identified with metaphoric association. In his essays and notes, Hardy claims that this mode of associative cognition provides a model for the kind of widely interpretive perception—the “imaginative sense of fact”—that drives his own artistic practice.³⁶

³⁵ The link between association and reading was made as early as Hume's *Treatise*, in which Hume suggests that association is the mental operation underlying signification. See Hume, 64-5.

³⁶ I take this phrase, of course, from Walter Pater's “Style,” published in 1888, ten years after *The Return of the Native*. I use Pater's phrase despite its later publication because it encapsulates the notions

For both author and reader, Hardy suggests, associative interpretation is an embodied version of Matthew Arnold's ideal of criticism: the spontaneous play of consciousness on stock notions and habits. Like Arnold's critical ideal, Hardy's model of what we might term critical interpretation is a form of freedom, of aesthetic agency in the fullest sense, through which the subject imaginatively constructs his world at the level of sensory perception. If association thus makes authorship possible, however, Hardy suggests that it does so by licensing a peculiar form of solipsism. Moreover, Hardy's writings evince a fear that, by investing such transformative agency in the act of interpretation, association also empowers the reader to displace the author—a misgiving that anticipates twentieth-century theories of the death of the author. This essay analyzes the theory of critical interpretation elaborated in Hardy's essays and in *The Return of the Native*. I argue that interpretation for Hardy is a broadly aesthetic and affective act, encompassing modes of associative perception that operate on the full range of bodily sensations. In doing so, I aim to correct the tendency in much scholarly work on Hardy to ascribe too much importance to vision and to reorient recent lines of inquiry on embodiment in Hardy's writing towards his fascination with sensory perception and materialist epistemologies.³⁷ It is ultimately this fascination, I argue, that gives rise to Hardy's lasting ambivalence towards reading, and shapes his indignant response to the critical attacks on his later novels.

of authorship that emerged among writers attentive to cognitive science in the late Victorian period. See *Appreciations*, 1-36.

³⁷ The importance of vision in Hardy's novels and poems has been so thoroughly established in scholarly work that vision has come to seem almost identical to mind itself for Hardy criticism. J. B. Bullen's assertion that "the more clearly something is seen in [Hardy's] work, the more clearly it is understood" has been nuanced by Ruth Bernard Yeazell's recent exploration of light in Hardy's fiction, in which she observes that visual experience is complex and is illusory as often as it is revealing. Nonetheless, Yeazell still maintains that light, and by extension visual experience, is "the medium of subjectivity" in Hardy's novels. Anna Henchman's work on Hardy and Victorian astronomy, while likewise disputing many of the stale assumptions in earlier work on sight in Hardy, still privileges vision as the *sine qua non* of sensory perception generally. See Bullen, 8; Yeazell, 48-75; and Henchman, 37-64. See also Berger. Embodiment more broadly in Hardy's fiction has been analyzed in relation to work by Elaine Scarry and in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "faciality" by William Cohen.

The Semiotics of Sensory Perception

In his 1888 essay, “The Profitable Reading of Fiction,” Hardy claims that in addition to judging a novel’s “regularity” of character and plot, “the appreciative, perspicacious reader...will see what his author is aiming at, and by affording full scope to his own insight, catch the vision which the writer has in his eye, and is endeavoring to project upon the paper, even while it half eludes him” (64). Hardy here suggests that reading is an act of collaboration, in which the reader supplements the text by reconstructing the author’s intentions despite his imperfect expression of them. This collaborative dynamic defines Hardy’s ideal reading scenario; he repeatedly, if implicitly, invokes it in his remarks on the reading of his work.³⁸ If this ideal reading scenario assumes a fairly generous reader, it also assumes that the reader is encountering a text with gaps or opacities, that the author’s vision has in fact “half elude[d] him.” Indeed, it implies that the best kind of reading—“appreciative, perspicacious” reading—can only be called forth by an imperfect piece of literature. The reader’s perspicacity can only exist in proportion to the text’s imperfection.

Hardy clarifies the aesthetic principles underlying perspicacious reading in his 1906 essay, “Memories of Church Restoration.” In this essay, Hardy expresses his ambivalence about Victorian methods of restoring old churches, a procedure that had in fact made up the bulk of his work as an architect. Criticizing the restorers’ cavalier tendency to replace the existing materials of the churches wholesale, Hardy nonetheless maintains that such methods are entirely consistent with the attempt to preserve the buildings’ formal beauty, which inheres not in the particular materials

³⁸ In the preface to *The Dynasts*, for example, Hardy claims that the text assumes “a completion of the action by those to whom the drama is addressed” in “supplementary scenes of the imagination” (viii).

making up a given church but in its “insubstantial” outline. Architectural form is an “aesthetic phantom without solidity,” freed from the contingencies of its concrete manifestation as long as its ideal outline can be discerned by the architect. The architect thus occupies a position vis-à-vis the church that is analogous to that of the reader vis-à-vis the text in Hardy’s ideal reading scenario. Just as the reader supplements the text by extrapolating from it the author’s imperfectly executed intentions, the architect sees through the dilapidated church to the ideal form it approximates.³⁹ In the process, however, the restoring architect neglects what Hardy calls the beauty of association. Whereas a church’s formal beauty is static, an aesthetic idea that persists in spite of the changes worked by time on the materials that compose it, its associative effects are the product of its history, of the meanings given to it and the uses made of it by humans during its passage through time. The associative sense both depends on and fosters historical continuity and social cohesiveness insofar as it values the traces of human activities and histories left on the materials composing the church and the ad hoc alterations to its form. Hardy therefore argues that “the protection of an ancient edifice against renewal in fresh materials is even more of a social—I may say a humane—duty than an aesthetic one. It is the preservation of history, fellowships, fraternities” (105-6).

Hardy’s claims about formal and associative beauty and their respective social values reveal a clear debt to Ruskin’s aesthetic theories. In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin argues that “in decoration or beauty, it is less the actual loveliness of the thing produced than the choice and invention concerned in the production, which are to delight us; the love and the thoughts of the workman more than his work; his work must always be imperfect, but his thoughts and affections may be true and deep” (32).

³⁹ With the difference, of course, that the reader does not attempt to render his interpretation permanent by amending the text. See “Memories of Church Restoration,” 103.

Here, as in Hardy's essays, the ideal form is simply the never-to-be-realized adequate expression of the artist's consciousness and intentions from which our delight in the building truly derives.⁴⁰ The spectator can thus read a building, according to Ruskin, by attending to the "mental tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it" (159). As long as the building itself remains legible, its imperfections are nothing more than the misspellings, smudges, and partial erasures that make it distinctive as a text and express the freedom of its authors.

Ruskin's abstraction of artistic meaning from its concrete embodiment in *The Stones of Venice* rehearses a move he had made earlier in *Modern Painters*, where he defined "great art" as that which conveyed the greatest number of ideas to the spectator's intellect, the "high[est] faculty of the mind." The composition of any particular painting is merely the "language" in which those ideas are expressed, and "the highest thoughts are those which are least dependent on language, [and therefore] the dignity of any composition, and praise to which it is entitled, are in exact proportion to its independency of language or expression" (*Modern Painters*, Vol. 1 10-2). Ruskin goes so far as to claim that an artist achieves truthfulness to the degree she induces a forgetfulness of the sensuous art-object in the spectator caught up in reflection on the higher order truths expressed in the painting, beside which "even the noblest ideas of beauty sink at once...into subordination and subjection" (33). The subordination of beauty here parallels the distinction Ruskin draws between landscape paintings that merely faithfully depict natural objects in a neutral field and those that attempt to express the thoughts and feelings of the painter. The first type brings a landscape to the spectator's eyes, leaving him to reflect or feel as he will, whereas the

⁴⁰ Like most middle-class Victorians with an interest in art, Hardy was well acquainted with Ruskin's criticism. He read *Modern Painters* during his efforts in the 1860s to educate himself in the visual arts, and invokes passages from *The Stones of Venice* both in notes written during his first trip to Venice in 1887 and in his subsequent recollections of this trip in his autobiography. See Bullen, 23, and *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, 201-3.

second masters and directs the spectator's attention, guiding his mind "to those objects most worthy of its contemplation," and leaving him "ennobled and instructed, under the sense of...having held communion with a new mind, and having been endowed for a time with the keen perception and the impetuous emotion of a nobler and more penetrating intelligence." Insofar as the first landscape painter chooses at all, she only selects on the basis of disinterested, universal standards of beauty, whereas the second landscape painter chooses objects for depiction based on their meaning and relation to her particular thoughts and feelings, rather than their beauty. For this reason, the second landscape is an "expression and awakening of individual thought," whereas the first is as standardized as "a tradesman's wares" (47-9).

Aesthetics thus seem to have been thoroughly subordinated to intellect in the first volume of *Modern Painters*, the very universality of beauty aligning it with the industrial production and alienated labor Ruskin so hated. Ruskin defines the beautiful as the quality in any object that gives us pleasure in its contemplation "without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect," and treats aesthetic experience of the beautiful as comparable to, though not identified with, simple, unreflective sense experience, "instinctive" and "necessary." Yet Ruskin insists that ideas of beauty are subjects of what he calls "moral perception" (29-31), a claim he echoes in the second volume of *Modern Painters* when he asserts "impressions of beauty...are neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral." He explains that impressions of beauty are subjects not of our aesthetic faculty alone, but of our aesthetic faculty transformed by an awareness of a divine "Intelligence" that created both the beautiful object and our capacity for pleasure in it. Our aesthetic faculties are by themselves "the mere animal consciousness of the pleasantness"; transfigured by a perception of divine purposiveness, our aesthetic sense becomes what Ruskin calls the theoretic faculty (*Modern Painters*, Vol. 2 13, 17). Just as the spectator's intellect reads the

art-object for the artist's intentions and consciousness, the theoretic faculty discovers in the beautiful object the divine intentions that license purely aesthetic pleasure. Ruskin goes on to insist that "no idea can be at all considered as in any way an idea of beauty until it be made up of these [feelings of gratitude and reverence for God], any more than we can be said to have an idea of a letter of which we perceive the perfume and the fair writing, without understanding the contents of it, or the intent of it" (18). Though Ruskin contends that the theoretic faculty is one of moral perception as distinguished from both intellectual and sense perception, it seems better described as a combination of the two. Sense perception takes pleasure in the beautiful object, pleasure that is hallowed by the perception of "the moral *meaning* of it," which is in turn, Ruskin suggests, "only discoverable by reflection" (144). Reflection is the more vital for Ruskin in that it is only through its discovery of the moral meanings of aesthetic pleasure that we can determine for which sense impressions it is our duty to cultivate a preference.

Ruskin's claims are potentially undermined, however, by the destabilizing effects of what he calls "the Associative faculty" (37). In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin dismisses the associationist aesthetics elaborated by Archibald Alison in his 1790 *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*. Ruskin scoffs at Alison's claim that beauty is merely the agreeableness we experience in objects associated with pleasing experiences and ideas, mocking especially Alison's contention that historical interest can elicit an aesthetic response. Nevertheless, Ruskin claims that, as opposed to "rational association"—the conscious association of objects with known histories or experiences—"accidental association" can exert a powerful influence on theoretic judgments:

The eye cannot rest on a material form, in a moment of depression or exultation, without communicating to that form...a charm or a painfulness for

which we shall be unable to account even to ourselves, which will not indeed be perceptible, except by its delicate influence on our judgment in cases of complicated beauty. Let the eye but rest on a rough piece of branch of curious form during a conversation with a friend, rest however unconsciously, and though the conversation be forgotten...yet the eye will, through the whole life after, take a certain pleasure in such boughs which it had not before, a pleasure so slight, a trace of feeling so delicate, as to leave us utterly unconscious of its peculiar power; but undestroyable by any reasoning, a part, thenceforward, of our constitution, destroyable only by the same arbitrary process of association by which it was created. Reason had no effect upon it whatsoever. And there is probably no one opinion which is formed by any of us, in matters of taste, which is not in some degree influenced by unconscious association of this kind. (37)

The unconscious, arbitrary power of associative feeling defies and undermines reason or reflection. Its operations are “momentous” enough to overwhelm the theoretic faculty, yet they are also so ethereal as to escape detection, and thus forestall any attempt by reason to correct for their presence in an analysis of taste. The illegible stories of the spectator’s own previous experiences become inextricably interpolated in the texts of authorial consciousness or Divine Intelligence.

Associative feeling thus imports an unconscious solipsism into theoretic judgments. As if startled by his own implications, Ruskin no sooner concludes the passage quoted above than he attempts to ground associative feeling in moral agency by claiming that pleasure and pain have the most associative power when they stem from “duty performed or omitted.” The lingering feelings arbitrarily connected to different objects thus become “the record of conscience, written in things external” (143-4). The spectator affected by associative feeling reads the story of her own

moral agency externalized in affecting objects. Ruskin's reasoning, not to mention his premises, is unconvincing—if associative feeling is not detectable as such, if it operates unconsciously, then as the written record of conscience isn't it still illegible?—not least because in order to make this argument he has to conflate unconscious, “accidental association” with “rational association,” collapsing the distinction he draws to describe the effects of association on theoretic judgment in the first place.

Despite the complications and contradictions it introduces into his arguments, Ruskin cannot simply reject the role of association in aesthetic experience, because its destabilizing force is necessary to preserve individual difference. The deviation from conventional perception that associative feeling introduces in theoretic judgments is an individuating principle: “by the mingling of universal and peculiar principles...such difference is secured in the feelings as shall make fellowship itself more delightful, by its inter-communicate character; and such variety of feeling also in each of us separately as shall make us capable of enjoying scenes of different kinds and orders, instead of morbidly seeking for some perfect epitome of the Beautiful in one” (38). Associative feeling preserves the possibility of individual variation within theoretic judgments, which would otherwise ossify into thoroughly standardized responses.

A similar dilemma underlies Hardy's claims in his aesthetic essays and his treatment of sensory perception in *The Return of the Native*. Hardy draws from Ruskin's distinction between standardized and imaginative landscape painting in an 1878 note. Reflecting there on landscapes by Boldini and Hobbema, Hardy describes their techniques—“that of infusing emotion into the baldest external objects...by the mark of some human connection with them”—as also his own: “This accords with my feeling about, say, Heidelberg and Baden *versus* Scheveningen—as I wrote at the beginning of *The Return of the Native*—that the beauty of association is entirely

superior to the beauty of aspect, and a beloved relative's old battered tankard to the finest Greek vase. Paradoxically put, it is to see the beauty in ugliness" (*Life and Work* 124). Defined against formal beauty, association, Hardy suggests, plays a critical role in his own artistic production. Yet despite the fact that Hardy here and in "Memories of Church Restoration" places formal beauty in explicit opposition to the beauty of association, he suggests that the mental operations involved in experiencing formal beauty share an identical cognitive structure with association. Formal beauty, perspicacious reading, and association all work according to the figural logic of synecdoche.

Synecdoche provides the framework for redintegration, the most fundamental operation of association. Under its most rigorous interpretation, association is the cognitive process that coalesces sensations into objects by bundling those sensations that are frequently experienced together into discrete objects of perception; after these bundles have become sufficiently tied in the mind, whenever one sensation bound up in them is experienced, "it serves as a sign or cue for the idea of the others to arise" (James 555). This process, termed redintegration, made association particularly important to late Victorian scientific and philosophical theories of cognition. While theories of association in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries treated sensations as unchanging simple elements, in the latter half of the nineteenth century physiology and experimental psychology demonstrated an unexpected contingency in sense experience, establishing that sensations are necessarily fragmentary and supplemented by memory in the act of perception. Association provided a model to account for the perceptual process whereby the mind supplements and completes the partial and contingent input of the senses.⁴¹ If physiologists demonstrated that

⁴¹ Anglo-American psycho-physiologists more often invoked association directly in their theories of perception, while their German counterparts employed perceptual models clearly derived from

sensation is a physics, associationists conceptualized sensory perception as a semiotics.⁴²

Hardy's descriptions of formal beauty and perspicacious reading consistently invoke the semiotics of association. Indeed, Hardy makes its synecdochic logic the defining quality not just of aesthetic contemplation but of the authorial "art of observation...[which] consists in this: the seeing of great things in little things, the whole in the part—even the infinitesimal part" (*Life and Work* 262). The convergence of author and reader through this shared mode of perception is made explicit in Hardy's 1891 essay, "The Science of Fiction," where Hardy distinguishes between the external observations of the mere imitator and the artist's apprehension of subtle qualities through "the mental tactility that comes from a sympathetic appreciativeness of life in all its manifestations." The "intuitive power" that the artist gains through sympathy, he claims, is the redintegrative ability "to see in half and quarter views the whole picture, to catch from a few bars the whole tune" (89). For Hardy, then, authorship depends on an intuitive power of observation that is identical to that required for ideal aesthetic contemplation. At issue in both cases is the capacity to read texts and perceive experiences as synecdoches. But, as Hardy's disparagements of realism make clear, the artist does not read these synecdoches according to his routinized perceptions. Rather, he transfigures the signs he encounters, and it is this capacity that separates the artist from the "mere imitator," who only transcribes what he sees and thus turns the novel into "a spasmodic inventory of items" (*Life and Work* 309).

association, such as Hermann von Helmholtz's theory of unconscious inference, but were often wary of identifying those models with association per se.

⁴² What Gary Hatfield has noted in reference to Helmholtz's work is broadly true for late Victorian cognitive science: in the majority of these accounts of cognition, "sensations act as signs, and perception is their interpretation." See Hatfield, 208.

Hardy's characterization of the realist novelist as "spasmodic," in thrall to the involuntary action of his body, points to the vexed question of agency for associationist psychology. Association abridges agency from two directions. The chain of sensations forged by association seems to routinize mental processes, rendering them independent of conscious direction.⁴³ Victorian physiologists reified this routinizing tendency by proposing a physical basis for (especially contiguous) association in neural habits— pathways inscribed in the nervous system by repeated experience.⁴⁴ At the same time, the arbitrary and overlapping connections between sensations mean that, however automatic they are, the paths tracked by the mind will always be indeterminate and aleatory.⁴⁵ James, adapting earlier work on association, attempts to preserve volition in the form of what he calls the "selective agency of interested attention." James locates this associative agency squarely within the movement from metonymic to metaphoric association, in which the mind, while recalling an object through contiguous association, focuses its attention on one quality of that object and reads it as a synecdoche of a different object sharing that quality. It is this capacity to analyze objects of perception and generate new wholes from the parts thus isolated by analysis that "separates the man of genius from the prosaic creature[s] of habit and routine thinking," those who, "by the general flatness and poverty of their aesthetic nature, are kept for ever rotating among the literal sequences

⁴³ Thomas Reid, for example, criticized Hume's theory of consciousness on these grounds: "That trains of thinking which by frequent repetition have become familiar should spontaneously present themselves to our fancy, seems to require no other original quality but the power of habit." See Reid, 426.

⁴⁴ The consequently unreflective, involuntary nature of association in these accounts led Wilhelm Wundt to divide perception into an active, attentive mode—termed apperception—and a passive, unintentional mode he identified as association. See *An Introduction to Psychology*, 81.

⁴⁵ So while James maintains that association is redeemed from "perfect indeterminism" because it is guided by identifiable principles, he admits that "it must still be confessed that an immense number of terms in the linked chain of our representations fall outside of all assignable rule...It thus remains true that to a certain extent...which associate of the interesting item shall emerge [in any train of thought] must be called largely a matter of accident—accident, that is, for our intelligence. No doubt it is determined by cerebral causes, but they are too subtle and shifting for our analysis" (James 577).

of their local and personal history.”⁴⁶ However, in thus conceptualizing metaphoric association in terms of volition and freedom defined against the thorough routinization of contiguous impressions, James comes perilously close to identifying agency with a chaotic indeterminacy equivalent, for late Victorian psycho-physiological theory, with dreaming, hallucinations, and madness. James acknowledges this possibility when he refers, somewhat nervously, to “the lawless revelry of similarity” (582-3).

In his meditations on reading and authorship and especially in *The Return of the Native*, Hardy anticipates James’ difficulties in negotiating a secure position for agency within the theories of cognition advanced by association psychology. In this 1887 note, Hardy distinguishes his preferred mode of artistic practice from realism on the basis of an associative transformation of perceptions that closely resembles James’ “selective agency of interested attention”:

I feel that Nature is played out as a Beauty, but not as a Mystery. I don’t want to see landscapes, i.e., scenic paintings of them, because I don’t want to see the original realities—as optical effects, that is...the exact truth as to material fact ceases to be of importance in art—it is a student’s style—the style of a period when the mind is serene and unawakened to the tragical mysteries of life; when it does not bring anything to the object that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there—half hidden, it may be—and the two united are depicted as the All. (*Life and Work*, 192)

As in his earlier note on landscapes, in which Hardy identifies with artists that do not imitate but rather transform external objects by infusing them with emotion, the

⁴⁶ James, 583, 572. James’ argument here is especially indebted to Shadworth Hodgson’s 1865 *Time and Space*, which claims that “no object of representation remains long before consciousness in the same state, but fades, decays, and becomes indistinct. Those parts of the object, however, which possess an interest resist this tendency to gradual decay of the whole object... This inequality in the object—some parts, the uninteresting, submitting to decay; others, the interesting parts, resisting it—when it has continued for a certain time, ends in becoming a new object.” See Hodgson, 266-7.

mature artist here projects part of himself into the objects he represents. Further, Hardy signals in this note that mature style is the product of associative perception by invoking the progress narrative of aesthetic transformation that opens *The Return of the Native*, a progress narrative that asserts the superiority of the beauty of association over the beauty of aspect.⁴⁷

Seeing in the Dark

In the description of Egdon Heath that famously opens *The Return of the Native*, Hardy contrasts “orthodox beauty” with the “chastened sublimity” of Egdon, which, appealing “to a more recently learnt emotion,” is becoming the aesthetic preference of “the more thinking among mankind” (10-1). Hardy identifies orthodox beauty with the Southern, Hellenic ideals of beauty that are sensual, serene, and self-contained.⁴⁸ Egdon Heath, on the other hand, possesses a chastened sublimity in common with the other gaunt wastes of the North.⁴⁹ Hardy suggests that this peculiar

⁴⁷ Hardy’s description of authorship here and elsewhere as a process entailing the mutual transformation of self and world suggest that it should be understood as “work,” as Elaine Scarry has described it in her reading of Hardy’s novels. That is, as an embodied process of mutual expression, inscription, and immersion, fraught with ethical complexity and the potential for both benefit and grievous harm. While Scarry focuses on representations of physical labor in Hardy’s novels, she notes that for Hardy these forms of creative labor were analogous to the creative labor of novel-writing, and she suggests that the same analogy holds between the “reciprocal ventriloquism” of these forms of labor and literary interpretation itself. This article seeks to extend Scarry’s reading by accounting for the specific dynamics and forms of embodiment and interpretive and ethical relationship that characterize reading and authorship for Hardy. See Scarry, 71.

⁴⁸ Hardy’s aesthetic progress narrative here is obviously indebted to Hegel’s account of the transition in art from a serene Classical period to a more self-conscious Romantic era. Classical art is serene, according to Hegel, because its artworks perfectly balance sensuous presence and idea, form and content, and are therefore self-sufficient and self-enclosed. In Romantic art, this harmonious balance has given way to a disjunction between form and content because the Idea has outgrown the possibility of adequate sensuous embodiment. Romantic artworks are therefore necessarily imperfect and gesture beyond and outside of themselves; in effect, they have become signs. Hardy, who would have encountered Hegel’s argument through Pater’s “Winckelmann” in *The Renaissance* (1873), articulates Hegelian art history with associationist psychology in his own theory of reading and aesthetics. See Hegel, 517-28, and *The Renaissance*, 114-149.

⁴⁹ In his reading of this passage, Bullen attributes Hardy’s northern ideal of “beauty in ugliness” to three sources: Hardy’s personal responses to different landscapes, recorded in notes, letters, and diaries; a

preference is emerging because the mournful sublimity of these gaunt wastes accords with the feelings of those who have grasped the dim prospects for human happiness in a world governed by the defective laws of an indifferent Creation. In contrast, the gardens of Southern Europe and “smiling champagnes of fruit and flowers” (10) painfully jar the moods of the more thinking among mankind because, like other instances of orthodox beauty, they express a “Hellenic idea of life” that Hardy identifies with the “old-fashioned reveling in the general situation” (167). The beauty of association that Hardy finds in ugliness here seems to consist of morose Northern Europeans finding pleasure in landscapes whose austerity echoes back to them their own gloominess. As it continues, however, the description of Egdon suggests that the beauty of association is comprised of a certain form of relation between the subject and the objects of experience, and not merely the affective content of any such encounter.

Egdon is defined by gloom not as a mood of despondency but as a state of darkness. The heath attains to its most active and characteristic state “during winter darkness, tempests, and mists. Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity. The storm was its lover; and the wind was its friend.” A “near relation of night” (10), Egdon engages in reciprocity with other forces of obscurity—night, storm, mist, etc. While the novel opens with a description of how the approaching twilight underscores the division between the darkening heath and the still day-lit sky, this dividing line is attenuated as the heath rises to meet the atmospheric elements of obscurity

widespread Victorian fascination with the Arctic in the 1870s that had been stimulated by the Nares and Markham expedition to Greenland in 1876; and the art and art criticism (especially by Ruskin and Pater) in which Hardy had taken a special interest at the time. While each of these sources undoubtedly influenced Hardy, this list is incomplete without an account of the associationist psychology through which Hardy theorized aesthetic response. Without this account, Bullen cannot adequately explain the distinction between orthodox beauty and associative beauty on which the other distinctions in this passage—between backward and advanced, South and North, and so forth—are founded. See Bullen, 90-117 and 259-264.

sympathetically, “in a black fraternisation towards which each advanced half-way” (10). This reciprocal relation between night and heath parallels the harmony between the heath and its observer, a harmony that is likewise called forth by obscurity, for Egdon “could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen” (9).

The Return of the Native is replete with such instances of perception through or despite sensory obscurity. Mrs. Yeobright and Thomasin discern the invisible reeds along the bank of the stream behind the Quiet Woman Inn from the “sounds as of a congregation praying humbly, produced by their rubbing against each other in the slow wind” (44). Though the dried heath-bells cannot be seen in the dark, the listener “inwardly” sees them when hearing the wind rustle hundreds of them at once. This dry, papery sound, which Hardy calls the “linguistic peculiarity of the heath,” brushes “so distinctly across the ear that, by the accustomed, the material minutiae in which it originated could be realised as by touch” (56). At Eustacia and Wildeve’s midnight meeting on the heath after the Guy Fawkes fires have been extinguished, “compound utterances addressed themselves to their senses and it was possible to view by ear the features of the neighborhood. Acoustic pictures were returned from the darkened scenery...for [the] differing features [of the heath] had their voices no less than their shapes and colours” (87). While the emphasis in many of these examples is primarily on acoustic pictures, the sense of seeing through the sense of hearing, Hardy is not focused exclusively on the relation of these two senses. In addition to the claim that one could realize “as by touch” the dry heath-bells from their sound, Hardy draws a parallel between acoustic pictures and the relation between touch and hearing when describing Eustacia’s pursuit of Clym and his family along the darkened heath. Eustacia’s sense, while listening intently to their movement and conversation, that “her ears were performing the functions of seeing as well as hearing” is, according to the narrator, an impression parallel to that of John Kitto, who, having gone deaf at age

twelve, claimed that his body had subsequently become “so sensitive to vibrations that he had gained the power of perceiving by it as by ears” (116).

These recurring instances of synaesthesia implicitly invoke the theory of association, according to which any sensation tends to call to mind its associates, but they are also insistently framed as moments of sensory obscurity analogous, for Hardy, to sensory disability. This analogy appears most forcefully in the narrator’s account of how Mrs. Yeobright developed a “comprehensiveness of...view” despite her removed and isolated social position:

There are instances of persons who, without clear ideas of the things they criticize, have yet had clear ideas of the relations of those things. Blacklock, a poet blind from his birth, could describe visual objects with accuracy; Professor Sanderson, who was also blind, gave excellent lectures on colour, and taught others the theory of ideas which they had and he had not.⁵⁰ In the social sphere these gifted ones are mostly women; they can watch a world which they never saw, and estimate forces of which they have only heard. We call it intuition. (188)

The trope through which these abilities are figured—that of watching without actually seeing—echoes the earlier associative, synaesthetic moments in the novel. Yet this passage further suggests that, for Blacklock, Sanderson, and Mrs. Yeobright, the sensory obscurity of objects allows them to be understood not statically but dynamically and relationally. Just as Egdon can best be felt when it cannot be seen, the novel suggests that Mrs. Yeobright’s figurative blindness enables her comprehensiveness of view.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Thomas Blacklock was not, in fact, born blind. Both he and Nicholas Sanderson went blind as infants after suffering from smallpox.

⁵¹ J. Hillis Miller notes the tacit identification of Mrs. Yeobright’s comprehensiveness of view and that of Hardy himself, pointing out the similarities between her “comprehensiveness of...view” and the famous aerial perspectives from which events are often narrated in *The Dynasts*. Miller also assimilates

Sensory obscurity stimulates comprehension for certain characters in *The Return of the Native* insofar as it elicits the conscious mental effort of perceptual interpretation. As I have argued above, associationist theories of cognition became particularly important in the latter half of the nineteenth century because they helped account for how the mind constructs and cognizes a stable world of objects on the basis of fragmentary and imperfect sensory input. Late Victorian psychophysicists conceptualized association as the perceptual supplementing and interpretation of sensations acting as signs. In *The Return of the Native*, the relationship between a registered sensation and its associates is thus one of denotation. Eustacia's undressing in the dark is "denoted" by the rustling sounds of her clothes and her movements (67). The presence of reeds along the stream bank behind the Quiet Woman is "denoted" by the sounds of the wind rubbing them together (44). The contours of the landscape lying below the Guy Fawkes revelers on Blackbarrow are "denoted" by masses of shade (19). Sensory obscurity calls attention to these routinized, associative recognitions of objects (at least for the novel's narrator), but for Mrs. Yeobright, Clym, and Eustacia, the three characters who are imperfectly assimilated to the customs of the heath, sensory obscurity also makes possible a mode of associative agency that escapes from and transforms such unreflectively conventional perceptions.⁵² Just as James' selective agency of interested attention

this comprehensiveness of view to the excess of vision that blinds Clym. In Miller's account of the novel, however, blindness is a "punishment for seeing too well," an inevitable consequence of having the "Promethean temerity" to aspire to "sunlike...knowledge and broad vision." This knowledge blinds by revealing the inadequacy of any object of desire as a phallus, a figure covering over the lack—the "always-absent source of value"—that structures desire. While Miller's reading is suggestive, it cannot situate Mrs. Yeobright's figurative blindness in relation to the text's other moments of synaesthetic, associative perception, and fails to recognize that blindness is not only a consequence and punishment but also a precondition for the type of comprehensive view attained by Mrs. Yeobright here. See Miller, 37-43.

⁵² The narrator, for instance, explicitly links the heath's obscurity to its capacity to stimulate attention, noting that "a condition of healthy life so nearly resembling the torpor of death is a noticeable thing of its sort; to exhibit the inertness of the desert, and at the same time to be exercising powers akin to those of the meadow, and even of the forest, awakened in those who thought of it the attentiveness usually engendered by understatement and reserve" (16-7).

proceeds by isolating sensuous qualities in a given object so that the mind can leap from them to objects sharing those or similar qualities, in *The Return of the Native* the absence of the full set of sensations composing an object allows wider latitude in the perceptual interpretation of the remaining sensations.⁵³ Sensory obscurity for Hardy is thus equivalent to the narrow focalization preliminary to the metaphoric leaps that bring different objects or ideas into relation with one another, and in this way, as the narrator remarks in *Tess*, “the defective can be more than the entire.”⁵⁴

While Hardy valorizes this mode of associative perception when it is applied to landscapes, *The Return of the Native* registers a deep anxiety that, when applied to other subjects, such a mode of perception raises difficult ethical and epistemological questions. These questions are foregrounded in the novel’s description of Clym’s face. Whereas Egdon Heath is a type of the beautiful landscapes of the future, Clym’s face is identified as “the typical countenance of the future” (167), a status his face owes to its embodiment of the strain of thought. Though its original physical beauty is still apparent when Clym first returns to Egdon, the “outer symmetry” of his face is already breaking down under “a wearing habit of meditation” (137). Clym’s pensiveness is prompted by “a full recognition of the coil of things,” the same perception, that is, of the “defects of natural laws” that allows the observer to perceive the beauty of association in the face of the heath:

⁵³ Hardy’s insistent suggestions that comprehensive perception begins with the anesthetic inhibition or absence of all sensations outside a tightly focalized area signal his participation in the broader late nineteenth-century attempt, magisterially described by Jonathan Crary, to locate forms of cognitive agency in the psychological phenomenon of attention. See Crary 11-79.

⁵⁴ *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* 265. Anna Henchman likewise underscores that enriched perception for Hardy’s characters always requires a diminishment or bracketing of some sensory input. In Henchman’s reading, this bracketing is analogous both to reading and to the procedures of astronomy, whose calculations of distance and motion similarly require that the misleading input of unreflective ways of seeing be ignored. However, Henchman unwarrantedly suggests that these mental operations are tantamount to the transcendence of an embodied subject position. I argue that Henchman’s otherwise suggestive reading needs to be supplemented by attention to the cognitive theories that Hardy drew from, without which she cannot fully account for the dynamics of the shift in perception that she correctly identifies. See Henchman, 45, 52-6.

The lineaments which will get embodied in ideals based upon this new recognition will probably be akin to those of Yeobright. The observer's eye was arrested, not by his face as a picture, but by his face as a page; not by what it was, but by what it recorded. His features were attractive in the light of symbols, as sounds intrinsically common become attractive in language, and as shapes intrinsically simple become interesting in writing. (167-8)

As Clym's recognition of the coil of things allows him to perceive the face of the heath as associatively significant, his own face becomes a text signifying this recognition to another observer. However, the associative perception that makes such significations possible also introduces an uncertainty about their provenance. The text of Clym's face is written by the "inner strenuousness" of his "unfold[ing]" thought: "[his] face was well-shaped, even excellently. But the mind within was beginning to use it as a mere waste tablet whereon to trace its idiosyncrasies as they developed themselves" (137). At the same time, Clym's face as a text requires a reader, who may, via association, project meanings of her own onto it: "people who began by beholding him ended by perusing him. His countenance was overlaid with legible meanings" (137). The adjective, "overlaid," here suggests not that the face's legible meanings are expressions of the mind within, but rather that they are superimposed by those perusing it.

The dilemma hinted at in this description of Clym's face—in reading a face, does one project meaning onto it or discover the meanings expressed by its owner?—plays out in the novel's plot through the courtship and marriage of Clym and Eustacia. Clym and Eustacia begin their mutual fascination without being able to see the other's face. Eustacia's interest in Clym is sparked just before his return to Egdon when she overhears two furze-cutters remark on what a suitable match he might be for her, or as she puts it, "on the harmony between the unknown and herself" (110). When Eustacia

first comes into contact with Clym in person, as he is walking with his family on the heath at evening, she is conspicuously denied a glimpse of his face. Instead, as she surreptitiously follows him, she attends closely to his voice, but not to the words it is speaking. His voice becomes the object of an act of association—it is at this moment that the narrator invokes Dr. Kitto to explain Eustacia’s sense that her ears are seeing as well as hearing—that proceeds independently of whatever feelings or ideas his voice is attempting to express. For Eustacia, Clym is thus, as Wildeve was before him, “the single object within her horizon on which dreams might crystallize” (95).

Similarly, Clym is unable to see Eustacia’s face when he meets her, after the brief encounter on the darkened heath, at the Yeobrights’ Christmas party. Eustacia attends the party as the Turkish Knight in the mummers’ play, and her costume includes ribbons draped over and disguising her face. Although Clym is still “arrested” by her presence, and guesses her gender despite the costume, Eustacia bemoans the limits imposed on her beauty by the circumstances: “the power of her face all lost, the charm of her emotions all disguised, the fascinations of her coquetry denied existence, nothing but a voice left to her; she had a sense of the doom of Echo” (143). Eustacia’s “doom” here mirrors her meeting with Clym on the heath, when he likewise appears to her only as an “awakening voice” (120). Insofar as they are each at first only voices to the other, both she and Clym share the fate of Echo, the nymph who fell into unrequited love with Narcissus and pined away until only her voice remained. In addition to “fate” or “end,” however, “doom” also denotes “judgment” or “punishment.” Before she fell in love with Narcissus, Echo often distracted Juno with stories to keep her from discovering the other nymphs in the act of sex with Jove. When Juno discovered the trick, she punished Echo by rendering her mute except to repeat others’ words. The doom of Echo is thus to be unable to speak for herself, to speak only the speech of others. Hardy’s allusion hints at the broader question at issue

in Eustacia's and Clym's misreadings of each other and in *The Return of the Native* generally: is associative perception inevitably an act of prosopopoeia, of narcissistically apprehending any object, whether animate or inanimate, as a text that merely echoes oneself?

Hardy foregrounds prosopopoeia in the novel's opening description of Egdon Heath, which is repeatedly described as being subject to such a prosopopoeic form of ventriloquism. After his separation from Eustacia, for instance, Clym perceives her presence in all the sounds of the surrounding heath: "a bird searching for worms in the mould of the flower-beds sounded like her hand on the latch of the gate; and at dusk, when soft, strange ventriloquisms came from holes in the ground, hollow stalks, curled dead leaves, and other crannies wherein breezes, worms, and insects can work their will, he fancied that they were Eustacia, standing without and breathing wishes of reconciliation" (336). The heath here is given voice through a double ventriloquism: first its inanimate features are figured as being spoken through by breezes and insects, but then this speech is transformed in Clym's hearing into the sounds of his estranged wife.

The ventriloquism of the heath in this passage echoes the earlier description of the sounds—made by the wind through the dried heath-bells—that accompany Eustacia's vigil on Blackbarrow. There, the narrator's associative recognition of the dead heath-bells triggered by the sound of their rustling is immediately followed by a meditation on the phrase, "the spirit moved them."

A meaning of the phrase forced itself upon the attention; and an emotional listener's fetichistic mood might have ended in one of more advanced quality. It was not, after all, that the left-hand expanse of old blooms spoke, or the right-hand, or those of the slope in front; but it was the single person of something else speaking through each at once. (56-7)

What the narrator describes here is a relay of reflected agency. The passive listener has a phrase and its meaning forced on her by the sound of the heath-bells, which is in fact the voice of the wind speaking through them, a “voice” that is in turn bestowed by the “fetichistic” emotional listener in the prosopopoeic act of figuring the wind as a speaking “single person.” Ultimately, this relay of ventriloquism expands to include Eustacia herself:

The bluffs, and the bushes, and the heather-bells had broken silence; at last, so did the woman; and her articulation was but as another phrase of the same discourse as theirs...What she uttered was a lengthened sighing...[and] there was a spasmodic abandonment about it as if, in allowing herself to utter the sound the woman's brain had authorized what it could not regulate. (57)

Eustacia’s dubious self-control here—allowing a spasmodic abandonment, authorizing an action she cannot regulate—suggests that her voice is not her own so much as an expression of a more encompassing force around her. This moment thus seems to anticipate *The Dynasts*, in which human thought and action are almost totally determined by the combination of relentlessly unfolding natural and social logics that Hardy calls the Will. And yet to read Eustacia as spoken through by something like the Will in the same way that Napoleon or the Duke of Wellington are acted through by the Will in *The Dynasts* is to elide the fact that the description of her in this passage is already a reading, an instance of free indirect discourse focalized through the same hypothetical “emotional listener” who has just prosopopoeically composed a single person speaking a discourse from the varied sounds of the heath (56).⁵⁵ Eustacia is spoken through by the emotional listener in the sense that it is the listener who

⁵⁵ William Cohen, for example, elides the emotional listener in his reading of Eustacia’s vigil as an instance of Hardy breaking down the distinction between an embodied human subject and the objective field of sensations. While I agree with many of Cohen’s broader conclusions, I suggest that a focus on modes of embodied perception can more fully account for the representations of embodiment and the near obsession with faces in *The Return of the Native*. See Cohen, 96-7.

perceives her utterance as a spasmodic abandonment that picks up and extends the discourse of the heath; Eustacia is here simply one more link in the relay of reflected agency.

The inclusion of Eustacia within this prosopopoeic circuit takes us back to the question of what it means to read others in *The Return of the Native*, but this circuit hints at Hardy's broader question underlying this one: what does it mean to read *The Return of the Native*? The relay of reflected agency in the passage above provides a partial answer to this question insofar as it can be read as a figure for associative reading in relation to an author. As we have seen, for Hardy an author by definition associatively transforms his object of representation, "bring[ing some]thing to the object that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there" (*Life and Work*, 192). It is this activity that distinguishes artistry from the spasmodic transcription of conventional perceptions that characterizes realism.⁵⁶ In "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," it is implicitly on the basis of this transfiguration of routinized perceptions that Hardy equates the results of his own literary activity, which he calls "representation[s] of life," with the "criticism of life" that, according to Matthew Arnold, constitutes poetry.⁵⁷ As the appeal to Arnold in that essay suggests, Hardy's associative perception is in many respects best understood as a psycho-physiological version of Arnold's ideal of criticism: the spontaneous play of consciousness on stock notions and habits.⁵⁸ Both Arnold's ideal of criticism and

⁵⁶ Hardy's claims about artistic perception fit within the larger efforts to re-envision the perceptual and affective activity of the artist in light of late Victorian cognitive science. The key problem of these efforts was to distinguish the artist's cognitive activity in crafting representations from modes of perception that, like those of Hardy's heath-dwellers, were seen as routinized and unreflective. In addition to Pater's definition of style as the artist's imaginative sense of fact, Hardy's claims about authorship bear a close resemblance to those in Wilhelm Dilthey's 1887 "The Imagination of the Poet." One of Dilthey's main arguments is that in the poet's imagination, "images are transformed under the influence of feelings. They are shaped by [the poet's] emotions, just as the uncertain outlines of rocks and trees are transformed by the influence of a traveler in the woods at night." See Dilthey, 95.

⁵⁷ See "The Study of Poetry," 279-307, and Hardy, "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," 61.

⁵⁸ Arnold's most influential attempt to define criticism is, of course, *Culture and Anarchy*. For an account of Hardy's critical relationship to Arnold's work, see DeLaura 380-399.

Hardy's model of associative perception are forms of aesthetic agency and freedom defined against the routinized operations of consciousness.

Critical and Uncritical Reading

We might speak, then, of something like critical reading as constitutive of authorship for Hardy. Hardy's Arnoldian author thus converges with Clym Yeobright, whose "culture scheme" of educating the inhabitants of the heath is itself anachronistically derived from Arnold. Clym's "modern perceptiveness" (167) likewise serves as a crucial mode of perceptual agency whose exercise composes a text. In the author's case, this text is the "representation of life" that constitutes the literary work; in Clym's case, the text is his face, composed of "marks derived from a perception of his surroundings" (137). The author's text, a novel such as *The Return of the Native*, for example, requires a reader no less than does Clym's face, and for any reader Hardy suggests that there are two possible relations with the text. One may passively receive the text, submitting it merely to thoroughly conventional associations that are equivalent to the spasmodic transcriptions of realism. Or one can read a text critically, by bringing something to it that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there. In the process, both the critical reader and the author become part of a relay of reflected agency, in which the reader prosopopeically composes an authorial consciousness out of a curious amalgam of the reading author and the writing reader.

Hardy's reflections on associative or critical reading anticipate many of the debates over reading and authorship in twentieth-century literary study. In their work on the "affective fallacy," Wimsatt and Beardsley categorically reject affective response as a legitimate mode of reading because, like critical reading in *The Return of*

the Native, it licenses a form of “impressionism and relativism” that interpolates the text by importing foreign meanings into it so that the text, “as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear.”⁵⁹ Even after New Criticism made affective response into a byword for unrigorous belle-lettrism, the distinction between routinized and critical reading has survived as the underpinning of a widely held disciplinary axiom that critical reading is the proper method and pedagogical goal of literary study.⁶⁰ The bifurcation of reading into critical and uncritical modes that underlies this enabling disciplinary axiom typically goes without saying, but it occasionally flashes into stark relief, as in Barthes’ pyrotechnic analysis of reading, *S/Z*. Barthes, like Hardy, there divides reading into two modes: the readerly and the writerly. Like routinized reading for Hardy, readerly reading is passive and unfree. A consumer rather than a producer of literature, the readerly reader is “plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive...instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or to reject the text.”⁶¹ Readerly reading proceeds according to habit—routine. It is constrained by the metonymic, unidirectional logico-temporal order of the hermeneutic and proairetic codes that bind it according to conventional notions of truth and empiricism. Over and against the readerly, the writerly reader is an active agent who produces the text’s multivalence, its plurality, by playfully moving between codes and thus achieving *jouissance* (affective response thus returns with a vengeance). Barthes’ theories of reading are idiosyncratic and emerge from a very different set of discourses and methodologies,

⁵⁹ See Wimsatt and Beardsley 21-39. Unlike Hardy, of course, the New Critics Wimsatt and Beardsley are not explicitly invested in an authorial consciousness whose intentions stand behind and ground the text, but their concerns over affective impressionism in reading are otherwise quite close to the misgivings in *The Return of the Native*.

⁶⁰ This persisting and often unreflective commitment to a vaguely defined ideal of critical reading is the subject of Michael Warner’s suggestive “Uncritical Reading.”

⁶¹ See Barthes 4. Barthes elaborates his theory of writerly *jouissance* in *The Pleasure of the Text*.

but they share many broad assumptions with Hardy's distinction between critical and routinized reading.

Barthes was happy to declare that writerly reading rendered the author not only irrelevant but dead. Hardy, however, was unsettled by the implications of critical reading for his status as an author and for the ethics of intersubjective relationships. In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy attempts to contain these effects by figuring the most problematic forms of critical and routinized reading according to the available cultural logic of the dark lady/fair lady binary. The novel's most troubling critical reader is found in the complex figure of Eustacia. Eustacia seems an unlikely choice to exemplify the critical reading identified by Hardy as the aesthetic mode of the future, since the novel opens by opposing this modernizing aesthetic mode to the appreciation of the refined Southern beauty of her type. She is thoroughly identified with the Southern, "Hellenic idea of life" (167). Hence she fails to appreciate the modern, Northern beauty of Egdon. But Eustacia's Hellenism is comprised of both a refractory, anti-modern sensualism and a form of perception strikingly similar to Hardy's version of critical reading.⁶² Despite her Classical features, Eustacia's beauty is in fact similar to that of the heath; both demand a "trained" eye because both are characterized by "a certain obscurity" (92). Hardy, playing on the full range of meanings of dark/fair, thus opposes Eustacia to Thomasin, her fair rival, whose features are more ingenuously "transparent...as if the flow of her existence could be seen passing within" (41).

⁶² In this respect, Eustacia reflects the contradictory meanings assigned to Classical art and culture in late Victorian Britain. Hellenism could be equivalent to an elegant but premodern sensualism, as in Hegel's art history or the passage in *The Return of the Native* that identifies "the Hellenic idea of life" with "the old-fashioned revelling in the general situation"(167). Or it could be equivalent to Criticism itself, as in Arnold's definition of Hellenism as the free, spontaneous play of consciousness upon stock notions and habits. This ambivalence in Victorian thinking about Greek and Roman antiquity is, of course, especially crucial for Pater.

Thomasin exemplifies the routinized and spasmodic mode of perception that Hardy calls Realism. Unlike Eustacia, Thomasin ventures out on the heath at night in the rain without fear because “to her there were not, as to Eustacia, demons in the air, and malice in every bush and bough. The drops which lashed her face were not scorpions, but prosy rain; Egdon in the mass was no monster whatever, but impersonal open ground...it was in her view a windy, wet place, in which a person might experience much discomfort, lose the path without care, and possibly catch cold” (355). For Thomasin, the heath is as transparent as her own subjectivity, but for that very reason she does not transform its features through metaphoric association. Its features are too clear and self-enclosed—too prosy—to her routinized perceptions. Thomasin does not aspire to perceptual agency. Like James’ creature of habit and routine thinking, she passively accepts the elements of the heath as givens, and thus for her they remain bereft of the emotional and human significance that would transform them, little more than mere bald, external objects. She is the fair lady—obedient to convention, and thus destined for a happy marriage. For that reason, however, her psychic life is, in the novel’s terms, both transparent and shallow.

The rebellious dark lady Eustacia, on the other hand, experiences the heath through metaphor; the raindrops that lash her face are not merely raindrops, but scorpions. By thus charging the commonplace phenomena of the heath with significance, Eustacia treats those features as signs in accord with the novel’s own definition of what makes up writing: “shapes intrinsically simple” that become “interesting” when invested with meaning (168). Eustacia invests the phenomena of the heath with meaning through the pathetic fallacy—reading it as a reflection of her own emotional condition—and in doing so she practices something like the technique that Hardy himself embraced as constituting “the beauty of association”: “the method...of infusing emotion into the baldest external objects...by the mark of some

human connection with them” (*Life and Work* 124). This mode of perceiving the heath recalls the narrator’s account of why Eustacia became involved with Wildeve: because he was “the single object within her horizon on which dreams might crystallize” (95).⁶³ The narrator confirms this resemblance in an aside that brings marital discord and Eustacia’s perception of Egdon into explicit parallel: “to dwell on a heath without studying its meanings was like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue. The subtle beauties of the heath were lost to Eustacia; she only caught its vapours” (73). The intrinsic meanings of Egdon are incomprehensible to Eustacia because she perceives the heath as echoing her own feelings, a voice through which she speaks to herself. The form of critical perception practiced by Eustacia on the heath is identical to her misreading of Clym’s face. And this mode of perception thus leads ineluctably to tragedy: to her disastrous liaisons with Wildeve; to her fatal marriage with Clym; and, finally, to her death from drowning while, in an echo of Narcissus, being rolled by currents along the “gashed and puckered mirror”(361) that is the surface of the weir.

Eustacia’s associative perception and its narrative consequences seem to rehearse Ruskin’s claim, in his discussion of the pathetic fallacy, that “when we are under the influence of emotion or contemplative fancy” we often succumb to “false appearances [that are] entirely unconnected with any real power or character in the

⁶³ J. Hillis Miller suggests that all objects of desire in *The Return of the Native* are catachreses—figures for that which has no name. Just as catachreses are figures for something that exceeds figuration, objects of desire for Hardy are temporary placeholders for an unattainable satisfaction. In Miller’s argument, the novel’s attention to the Sisyphean projects of figuring and possessing an object of desire reveals that catachresis is intimately related to prosopopoeia. Hardy’s characters prosopopoeically compose a face as a catachresis—a figure for an unrepresentable desire. Thus, as Eustacia crystallizes desires on an object, she gives it a legible face, but this face is a figure that speaks for Eustacia and her desires, rather than for the person upon whom it is composed. Hence, Miller notes, “the face of the other is for Hardy always seen narcissistically. It is one’s own face in the mirror” (Miller 31-2, 52-3). Within its psychoanalytic framework, Miller’s reading cannot explain why it is not merely desire but feeling in general that distorts and undermines the characters’ readings of each other in *The Return of the Native*. Eustacia’s crystallizing her dreams on Wildeve or overlaying her own meanings on Clym’s face are simply two more instances of the same form of associative perception that she practices on the heath by charging it with emotions unrelated to desire.

object, and only imputed to it by us” (*Modern Painters*, Vol. 3, 175). In *The Return of the Native*, to perceive another subject critically, as Eustacia does Clym, is to compose a text that necessarily distorts the original text produced by the unfolding of that person’s own reflective subjectivity through that same process of critical perception. Hence the double significance of blindness in the novel: the obscurity that restricts one’s apprehension of an object, as in the case of Mrs. Yeobright or the blind or deaf poets and scholars invoked by Hardy, can incite a more strenuous form of perception that treats the sensations making up the object as multivalent signs and thus grasps the object and its relations more comprehensively; but as consciousness thus interprets the obscured object, it is liable to be, in Ruskin’s phrase, “over-dazzled by emotion,” and so lose its comprehensiveness of view after all (*Modern Painters*, Vol. 3 178). Clym’s blindness from reading in the dark crystallizes the tendency of the empowerment in critical perception to undermine itself.

The possibility of such a reversal also haunts Hardy as the author of *The Return of the Native*. In displacing the most striking instances of critical misreading from Clym onto Eustacia, who, as the dark lady, is defined by her refusal to abide by the established social order, Hardy underscores his discomfort with the potential of critical reading to appropriate authorial authority. As we have seen, Hardy’s critical perception—an active mode of interpretation analogous to reading through which the artist translates objects by infusing them with emotional significance in the act of perception—is the source of that imaginative sense of fact that constitutes a properly artistic style for Hardy. As he practices this mode of perception, the author produces a text that Hardy, aligning his own aesthetics with Arnold’s writing on poetry, calls a criticism of life. However, just as metaphoric association both preserves agency and licenses a form of mental play so unregulated that James refers to it as “the lawless revelry of similarity,” critical reading opens up its texts to a degree of indeterminacy

that Hardy finds both exhilarating and unsettling (James 582-3). The plot of *The Return of the Native*—as well as its obsession with prosopopoeia—is driven by this ambivalence. If the critical reader cultivates agency by transforming her text, by prosopopoeically composing an authorial consciousness out of an amalgam of both the author and herself, then Hardy's repeatedly invoked ideal of perspicacious reading—in which the reader faithfully reconstitutes author and intentions in the act of reading—paradoxically leaves no room for critical reading at all. Critical reading, then, lays both the author and his texts open to exactly the kind of misreadings that so infuriated Hardy over the course of his professional life. In an irony of the kind Hardy himself might have appreciated, the same form of critical reading that made authorship possible for him also ensured his own death as an author.

CHAPTER 4
BEAUTIFUL GRAFFITI:
VERNON LEE, WILHELM DILTHEY, AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF ART

Belcaro, the first collection of aesthetic essays by Vernon Lee, began as a series of interruptions in her attempts to complete a history. In the preface to *Belcaro*, Lee writes that during the composition of her first book, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, she found herself “haunted” by the problems, questions, and ideas that became the focus of the essays making up *Belcaro*. Lee found herself thus haunted, she explains, because in returning to the historical material she had compiled for her history, she found herself experiencing it differently: rather than perceiving her compilations as historical material, she found herself responding to it aesthetically. There is, Lee suggests in *Belcaro*, an important difference between these two modes of encounter. To experience an object aesthetically, Lee argues, is to respond to it in its concrete, sensuous particularity. To historicize an object, however, is to treat it as a kind of “historical fossil” and to generalize a historical moment or period from it—in other words, to treat it not as an end in itself, but as a means to abstract historical knowledge. Lee’s first book of aesthetic essays thus registers an important tension between history and aesthetics that, in varying forms, will preoccupy Lee in much of her work from 1878, when her first aesthetic essays were published, to 1887, when *Juvenilia*, her second collection of essays appeared.

The distinction Lee makes between historicizing and aesthetic perception, in its insistence that aesthetic experience is sensuously particular, signals her debt to Walter Pater, which earned her the title “Walter Pater’s disciple” (Colby 56). Lee was

especially indebted to Pater's call, in the preface to *The Renaissance*, to attend first of all to "one's own impression as it really is." Pater there defines aesthetic experience as essentially a physics: all objects of aesthetic criticism are "receptacles of so many powers or forces...producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind" (*The Renaissance* xxix-xxx). Aesthetic criticism attends reflectively to these sensations in their uniqueness, rather than using them as the pretext for abstract speculation. Lee rehearses Pater's argument in the preface to *Belcaro*, whose primary aim she defines as "getting rid of those foreign, extra-artistic, irrelevant interests, which aestheticians have since the beginning of time interposed between art and those who are intended to enjoy it; my work has...been to logically justify that perfectly simple, direct connection between art and ourselves, which was the one I had felt, as a child, before learning all the wonderful fantastications of art philosophers" (*Belcaro* 12-3).

Lee's goal of returning to aesthetic innocence is shaped by the principles of what Linda Dowling has called "aesthetic democracy"—the Victorian political project deriving ultimately from Shaftesbury that sought to ground the relentless and seemingly divisive transformations of liberal modernity in a moral-aesthetic *sensus communis* that simultaneously promised free and valid judgment to all equally and ensured that those judgments would conform to shared moral-aesthetic standards.⁶⁴ Lee accesses the primary aims of this project as well as its egalitarian rhetoric when she declares, "my object is not to teach others, but to show them how far I have taught myself, and how far they may teach themselves." In making this claim, moreover, Lee further underscores the distinction she draws between the aims and methods of history and those of aesthetic criticism, since she has already described the change in her

⁶⁴ Dowling reads Pater's preface to *The Renaissance* as a particularly important and galvanizing, if implicit, manifesto of Victorian aesthetic democracy. See Dowling 75-100.

position from writing *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* to *Belcaro* as a shift from professorial specialist to lowly student: “Thus I, from my small magisterial chair or stool of 18th century-expounder, have descended and humbly gone to school as a student of aesthetics” (5).

Lee applied the lessons of this humble schooling in her 1884 book of historical essays, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and Mediaeval in the Renaissance*, by focalizing the work through her own impressions of historical objects. This impressionistic technique, “by giving you a thing as it appears at a given moment, gives it you as it really ever is; all the rest is the result of cunning abstraction, and representing the scene as it is always, represents it (by striking an average) as it never is at all” (*Euphorion* 10). In its resistance to abstraction and its insistence on the particularity of sensory encounter, Lee’s historiographical impressionism is characteristic of British aestheticism, but in defining this method against an “average,” Lee highlights a disjunction between concrete sense judgments and common sense. The dense particularity of sense impressions, Lee suggests in *Euphorion*, make it impossible for her impressions to match either with those of her readers or those of the historical subjects she studies, rendering these others unknowable.

Euphorion thus throws into relief a conflict in early British aestheticism between its tacit advocacy of aesthetic democracy and its at times uncomfortable tendency to resemble a mode of cultivated solipsism. The roots of this conflict lie in the emergence of aestheticism at the turn of the 1860s and 70s, a moment that immediately followed the rise of cognitive science. The late 1850s and early 1860s saw the publication of ground-breaking works in this field, such as Hermann von Helmholtz’s magisterial *Handbook of Physiological Optics* and *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* as well as Wilhelm Wundt’s early essays on sensation, which demonstrated in detail that seemingly given

sensations and perceptions were highly complex and constructed in surprisingly minute and variable ways. An understanding of this complexity lies behind Pater's characterization of aesthetic experience as a physics. By revealing the teeming play of forces underlying the most apparently straightforward sensations and perceptions, cognitive science decomposed the apparent stability of aesthetic common sense, opening up the kind of vertiginous perspectives that Pater meditated on in the notorious "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*.

Lee does not explicitly grapple with this conflict and in fact seems largely unaware of new physiological accounts of sensation in *Belcaro*, where she instead focuses on drawing a firm distinction between aesthetic experience and the psychology of association. Lee attempts this demarcation for the same reason that she rigorously distinguishes between aesthetic and historicizing modes of perception: association, like historicism, regards the aesthetic object not as an end-in-itself but merely as the pretext for a mode of speculation only tenuously connected with the object. Association, Lee suggests in *Belcaro*, is a form of mental graffiti that treats the art object as a *tabula rasa* on which it can scrawl whatever ideas it wishes. It therefore, she argues, introduces an unacceptable degree of indeterminacy and instability into aesthetic experience. Theories of association in the 1870s and 80s, however, were being substantially revised in light of the new accounts of the mind advanced by cognitive scientists such as Helmholtz and Wundt. In an irony that Lee would subsequently acknowledge, the associationist theories which had seemed to her to destabilize aesthetic experience were being converted into explanations of how, given the irresolvable instabilities of the physics of sensation, a stable world of common sense was possible at all.⁶⁵ As Lee's further reading made her more acutely

⁶⁵ Jonathan Crary refers to this as "the problem of 'reality-maintenance'" opened up after physiology had eroded the possibility of Kant's transcendental unity of apperception. See Crary 14-7.

aware of these instabilities, she reassessed the relation of association and aesthetics in her 1887 *Juvenilia*. In the course of her reassessment, however, Lee is led to a partial reversal of the position that guides her method in *Euphorion*.

This chapter charts Vernon Lee's progress as a student of aesthetics and a specialist in history in relation to her engagement with cognitive science. The development of Lee's aestheticism and historiographic methods from the publication of the first aesthetic essays in 1878 to the appearance of *Juvenilia* in 1887 is in part the story of her increasing awareness of cognitive science. I argue that neuroscientific and psychological theories became a significant preoccupation for Lee during these years because they presented specific challenges to the ethical principles that inhered in Victorian aesthetic democracy as a political and social project. Lee's responses to those challenges in her aesthetic essays parallel the efforts made by Wilhelm Dilthey in his own essays on aesthetics to contain the relativist, solipsistic forms of perception incited by the democratization of art. Lee and Dilthey, I argue, historicize aesthetic response in the service of their vision of an aesthetic polity in which a stable *sensus communis* is forged and managed by the secret shaping hands of an artistic aristocracy, under whose tutelage the public receives an aesthetic education in common norms of feeling and perception without being aware of it. For both writers, however, this gambit re-introduces a form of aesthetic relativism at the level of history, rendering aesthetic objects from other historical cultures opaque and unknowable in the present. In the present, Lee and Dilthey suggest, one can only perceive the artworks of the past through the layers of beautiful graffiti left behind by the intervening generations. Finally, this chapter argues that Lee's essays, unlike Dilthey's, embrace aesthetic graffiti as a means of resisting or deflecting the perceptual influence of the artistic aristocracy, and thus retaining a measure of aesthetic autonomy and privacy.

The Museum, and Other Forms of Aesthetic Vandalism

Belcaro begins with the allegory of a conversion from history to aesthetics. “The Child in the Vatican,” the first essay in the collection, tells the story of a child learning to experience aesthetic pleasure in sculpture in the midst an environment actively hostile to such pleasure: the museum. The museum space, Lee suggests, is organized not to elicit aesthetic pleasure, but to facilitate historical classification. Thus, the Vatican has abstracted its statuary from their old places in garden or market or temple, where they were fully integrated with daily life, and deposited them in tiny “cells” ranged according to classificatory systems based on period and school. In its devotion to dry, historical abstraction, the Vatican has become an “over-ground catacomb...a dismal scientific piece of ostentation, like all galleries; a place where art is arranged and ticketed and made dingy and lifeless.” For this reason, if we desire to take aesthetic pleasure in the objects displayed in the museum, “we must be prepared to isolate what we wish to enjoy, to make for it a fitting habitation in our fancy” (*Belcaro* 17-8).

To re-place the Vatican’s classical sculptures within a mental habitation conducive to pleasure is difficult, however, because modern mental and aesthetic faculties themselves resemble the museum space. This correspondence, Lee suggests, partly stems from the fact that modern aesthetic receptivity has been shaped by paintings rather than statuary, and this adaptation to painting has been facilitated by the psychology of association:

Out of fine glossy modern pictures...confused with haunting impressions, of things seen or heard of (the strange, deeply significant sights and words of our childhood), do we get our original, never really alterable ideas and feelings about art; for much as we may clip, trim, and bedizen our minds with borrowed

things, we can never change, never even recast its solid material: a compact, and seemingly homogeneous soul mass, made up of tightly-pressed, crushed odds and ends of impression; broken, confused, pounded bits of the sights and sounds and emotions of our childhood.” (22)

The obstacles to a properly aesthetic appreciation of the statues are two-fold here. Lee’s “soul mass” at once too rigidly limits and too chaotically variegates sense experience. Never really alterable, the soul mass can be cosmetically refined but not significantly reshaped. Yet, at the same time, its shape is the product of broken, confused odds and ends crushed indiscriminately together. In this respect, the soul mass perfectly complements the museum space, whose classificatory impulses and organizational strategies have been evolved to order the accumulated art objects from an overwhelming multiplicity of historical periods. However, to the degree that the spectator gives rein to these classificatory impulses, she fails to respond aesthetically—to “feel actual, simple, unreasoning, wholesome pleasure in the sight of the old broken marbles”—and instead treats each sculpture as “an historic fossil, by study of which, as with the bone of a pterodactyl or an ichthyosaurus, [she] can amuse [herself] reconstructing the appearance and habits of a long dead, once living civilization” (23). The spectator thus approaches each statue as a synecdoche of its original culture, and in doing so falls prey to the second obstacle to a properly aesthetic appreciation of sculpture: the fact that the modern mode of aesthetic perception treats art works not as receptacles of forces but as signs. The appreciation of sculpture, which was “born when the world was young and had not yet learned to think and talk in symbolical riddles,” defies the tendency of modern aesthetic response to interpret artworks (20). Hence the importance Lee gives to painting in the development of the soul mass; within the Hegelian schema of art history she invokes

throughout the essay, painting emerges once the idea begins to predominate over the form in the work of art, once the art work becomes a sign.

Insofar as the spectator reads these artworks only as synecdoches for their cultures of origin, she fails to attend reflectively to the artworks in their concrete specificity or to her concrete impressions of them. She perceives through a semiotics, rather than a physics. As Lee puts it elsewhere in *Belcaro*, the modern spectator thus transforms each artwork she encounters into “a mere stereotyped symbol, not more artistic than the names which [the artist] might have engraved beneath each figure” (88). In fact, Lee suggests that modernized perception not only carves a name underneath the artwork, but actually performs an act of mental vandalism, writing over the artwork itself in defiance of the intentions of the artist and any possibility of intrinsic meaning. The modern spectator thus effaces the aesthetic object, treating it as “a meaningless thing, to which we have willfully attached a meaning which is not part or parcel of it—a blank sheet of paper on which we write what comes into our head, and which itself can tell us nothing” (60). The meaning that we thus scrawl across the artwork seems not fixed and stereotyped as are historical labels, however, but aleatory; it is quite simply whatever comes into our head.

The dry classification of art objects by historical period finds its counterpart in these random acts of mental graffiti. The regimented space of the museum is simply the inverse of the “habitation in our fancy” made up of confused “haunting impressions” and the “broken, confused, pounded bits of the sights and sounds and emotions of our childhood.” In both cases, the underlying modes of perception are associative. Lee explicitly identifies these “haunting impressions” as associative in the preface to *Belcaro*.⁶⁶ She there explains that she chose the place-name “Belcaro”

⁶⁶ In *Belcaro*, especially, Lee consistently employs a Gothic rhetoric in her characterization of association, especially in its aleatory form. There are likely two reasons for this. First, if Victorian Gothic is, as Patrick O’Malley argues, “the thematic or discursive eruption of a traumatic past into the

as a title for her collection because the memory of a day there with Mary Robinson similarly “haunted” her during the composition of her essays. While this title “logically...means nothing,” it has, for her, “a meaning of association” (2). Likewise, Lee’s characterization of historicizing perception as synecdochic signals that she understands this mode of response, too, as associative, insofar as association functions first of all according to the figural logic of synecdoche.

Most of the essays in *Belcaro* are at pains to theorize a mode of aesthetic experience that does not depend on or include association. Again and again, Lee decries the fact that, in transforming the artwork into a sign, association becomes a form of abstraction, leading the mind away from the concrete, sensuous art object and thus neglecting the form in favor of the content. Hence the importance of classical sculpture in awakening the child’s sense of beauty in “The Child in the Vatican.” As the art form that, according to Hegel, achieved the ideal interpenetration of form and content, embodiment and idea, classical sculpture does not require interpretation; the mind contemplates the form instead of drifting and wandering off in search of its meaning. However, just as the child in the Vatican goes on to perceive other art forms in the same way it has learned to view sculptures, so Lee insists that the classical mode is the true form of aesthetic response, regardless of the artistic medium..

We must remember that this work is merely the externally existing, definite, finite form, and not the ideas of emotions which, by the power of association, that form may awaken in ourselves. What the artist gives is merely the

present, distorted into a suggestion of the supernatural,” then Lee’s use of it here gestures at the role of inheritance in association, which we will explore more fully below. But O’Malley also observes that the Victorian Gothic often “pose[s] a challenge to the notion of the stabilizing classificatory power of language.” The Gothic thus furnishes particularly apt tropes for association, insofar as the Gothic has, by the late Victorian period, become widely available in Victorian culture as a figure for indeterminacy itself. Lee herself, moreover, describes the Gothic in terms that are strikingly similar to her description of the “soul-mass.” In the preface to *Hauntings*, she claims that the supernatural is made up of “things of the imagination...sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions, litter of multi-colored tatters, and faded herbs and flowers.” See O’Malley, 12-30, and *Hauntings*.

arrangement of lines and colours in a given manner, which may, as in painting, resemble an already existing natural object; or, as in architecture and pattern decoration, resemble no already existing natural object...This, and not any train of thoughts awakened by this possibly but not necessarily existing resemblance to an already known natural object...is artistic form, the absolutely, objectively existing work of art. (183-4)

Lee thus suggests in *Belcaro* that art's "magic speech, its language of lines and colours and sounds" is not properly a language at all, because art and aesthetics are fundamentally separate from representation and interpretation (64). Lee, drawing especially from Pater's arguments in "The School of Giorgione" (which I discuss in the next chapter), defines art fundamentally as a physics, rather than a semiotics.

For this reason, Lee excludes moral concerns from the proper function of art. Narrowly circumscribed within the limits of direct sensuous impressions of a particular conjunction of physical forces, the domain of aesthetic response remains independent of whatever moral representations are incidental to the artwork. Despite these formal protestations, however, Lee's essays suggest that one of her primary concerns with an associative mode of aesthetics was, in fact, that association undermined the ethical common sense authorizing aesthetic democracy. When viewing an artwork associatively, Lee writes, "although your bodily eyes may be fixed on the picture or statue, your intellectual eyes are busy with some recollection or impression in your mind" (64). In this regard, association enables a willful indifference to the intentions of the artist and a solipsistic turning away from sociality. To the extent that the spectator attends to a private, "half articulate language...of associations" at the expense of the "clear language of form, which is equally intelligible to all men" (283), he suppresses *sensus communis* and thus refuses to participate in the common judgments that affirm our capacity to hold shared moral or

aesthetic standards. Concomitantly, in turning away from the social elements of aesthetic experience and toward a purely personal language of association, the spectator fails to respond to the artwork as a communicative utterance. In arbitrarily scrawling across the artwork his private associations without attending to its “real, inherent effect,” the spectator fails to recognize the artwork as the product of another consciousness, separate from itself and with a moral claim to recognition as such. Lee makes this argument explicitly in *Juvenilia*, where she lists it as a central reservation in her reassessment of association and aesthetics. There, she claims that association’s indifference to the “reality” of the work of art violates the imperative to “do our best to get at the reality of man, woman, beast, or plant, knowing that on that reality depends all it can do for us, or that we must do for it” (*Juvenilia* 45-6). Lee illustrates this moral failure with the figure of the “unproductive aesthete,” who sits at a concert “blandly, a pleasant noise of music soothing or gently stirring [his] nerves, letting [his] mind fill (like a leaky boat) with vague thoughts and emotions” while ignoring the musical forms on which the composer labored with an “agony of long unsuccessful effort” (49). In this way, Lee finesses the question of authorial intention: if an artist’s intentions are merely the physics of the artwork, intention can be grasped by the spectator without the necessary recourse to interpretation or mental reference to something beyond the concretely existing object.

In *Belcaro*, Lee’s moral-aesthetic principles are underwritten by the assumption that a given artwork’s form is “equally intelligible to all men”—that, in other words, there is an “absolutely, objectively existing work of art” available to a common sensory experience. Lee thus invests sensory experience with a stability that, as Pater knew very well, is an illusion of language and habit. By the 1870s, the emergence of neuro-science had rendered such assumptions untenable by demonstrating an unexpected complexity and contingency underlying even the most

routine cognitions. The very dawn of the nineteenth century saw important scientific work that heralded the demise of classical models of perception, such as William Herschel's discovery of light outside the visible spectrum in 1800 and Thomas Young's demonstration that light is a wave, rather than a particle, as Newtonian orthodoxy held. By mid-century, Helmholtz had invented the ophthalmoscope in order to closely examine the retina, and found that light is not transmitted through the eye as through a transparent medium, but instead falls on complex field of receptors inside the retina that initiate a series of neural processes constituting visual sensations. As Jonathan Crary suggests, by the 1870s neural science established beyond doubt that sensation and perception were densely mediated processes, which entailed *active* participation by both the sense-organs and the consciousness of an observing subject (Crary 152-155).

Fundamentally, nineteenth-century cognitive science proposed that any cognition is the product of sensory and perceptual faculties that form an interlocking, two-tier system dedicated to the filtration, selection, and supplementation of stimuli. The first tier of this cognitive system is made up of the sense organs, whose functioning neural science analyzed with unprecedented clarity. As these sensory processes were more clearly mapped out, however, their hold on a stable world of objects became considerably diminished. Not only did the discovery of light outside the visible spectrum and the closer measurement of the range of human hearing⁶⁷ make clear the narrow range of human senses, but the more precise understanding of their operations suggested that the sensations they produce are always to a certain degree contingent and fragmentary.⁶⁸ As the instability of the first tier of cognition became

⁶⁷ Helmholtz claims that the range of human hearing runs from 20 to 32,000 waves per second, relatively close to the contemporary scientific consensus that the human hearing range is between 20 and 20,000 hertz. See *Science and Culture*, 52.

⁶⁸ For example, the close examination of the retina revealed that the fovea—or center—was densely packed with nervous receptors, which were far sparser in the peripheral parts of the eye. As Crary

apparent, cognitive scientists were obliged to theorize a second tier that stabilized the first by synthesizing its fragmentary sense data in the act of perception. The primary model for synthesizing perception was provided by associationist psychology, whose theories were continually revised to fit with new physiological knowledge.⁶⁹

Helmholtz, for example, drew substantially from associationism in his account of “unconscious inference”—the theory that perception results when we unconsciously infer the existence of an object from a fragmentary group of sensations.

For Helmholtz, as for nineteenth-century cognitive science generally, what association crucially provides is not merely a grammar of combination for sensations but a semiotics, a means of shoring up through language the common world of objects now threatening to collapse into a teeming, unpredictable vortex of atomized and partial sensations. As Gary Hatfield argues, in Helmholtz’s epistemology of unconscious inference, “sensations act as signs, and perception is their interpretation.”⁷⁰ One of the most paradigmatic examples of perceptual interpretation is thus found in the act of reading itself. Wundt, among others, calls attention to the fact that practiced readers do not focalize every letter in a given word while reading, but instead make interpretive leaps based on attention to only a few elements of the word and likely combinations with the words preceding it. Hence the tendency to pass unconsciously over misspellings and other small errors. Wundt concludes that reading offers a particularly vivid example of a pervasive mental process:

notes, while the difference between foveal and peripheral vision was always apparent to naïve observation, its systematization in physiology presented epistemological problems and exposed the width and depth of focus in the ostensibly simultaneous vision of classical perspective as a *composite* of separate moments of foveal vision. See Crary, 290-295.

⁶⁹ Psychology thus acts as an indispensable supplement for physiology; in the second half of the nineteenth-century, the two disciplines are unthinkable without one another. Crary argues that the psychology of attention supplanted earlier associationist models during the 1870s, but the history of physio-psychology at the end of the nineteenth century is considerably messier than his account of this shift allows; associationism in fact provided the foundation for many of the early theories of attention.

⁷⁰ See Hatfield 208. Hatfield provides a useful overview of the development of Helmholtz’s theory of unconscious inference.

What we imagine we perceive directly really belongs in a great extent to our memory of innumerable previous impressions, and we are not aware of a separation between what is directly given to us and what is supplied by [spontaneous association]...Many words of a lecture are imperfectly heard; the contours of a drawing or painting are only imperfectly represented in our eye. In spite of this, we notice none of the gaps. That does not happen because we perceive things inaccurately, as this phenomenon is often incorrectly interpreted, but because we have at our disposal the rich stores of memory which fill out and perfect the perceived image. (*Introduction to Psychology* 100-1).

While Wundt, like Helmholtz and many other nineteenth-century cognitive scientists, quibbled with the exact fit between associationist models and these perceptual processes, their qualifications and reworkings of association stemmed from the need to invoke a perceptual semiotics in order to preserve a stable world of common objects and judgments from the contingency of sensory experience. In *Belcaro*, Lee makes exactly the opposite argument—that a perceptual semiotics should have no place in aesthetic judgment because it imports contingency into what should be a stable world of common sensory experience—and thus she is bound to run aground against the growing realization that sensory experience is far more volatile than had been believed. As Lee reappraises this relationship over the course of the 1880s, she is likewise forced to reassess the relationship between history and aesthetics, and is finally led in *Juvenilia* to posit the profound historicity of all aesthetic experience.

Figuring the Aesthetic Polity

In the mid 1880s, as Lee began to rework her aesthetic ideas in light of her growing awareness of neural science and experimental psychology, Wilhelm Dilthey was simultaneously elaborating his own cognitive aesthetics. In “The Imagination of the Poet,” first published in 1887, Dilthey attempts to grasp the implications of cognitive science for aesthetics with an eye towards the same constellation of problems taken up by Lee—the relationship between history and aesthetics, and the potential political effects of an emerging “aesthetic democracy.” Like Lee, Dilthey begins his essay by invoking the bewilderment of late nineteenth-century Europe awash in an incomprehensible amalgamation of the art of different cultures and historical moments. “Today,” he writes, “a colorful mixture of forms from all periods and peoples is breaking in upon us and seems to undo every delimitation of literary genres and every rule...In this anarchy, the artist is forsaken by rules; the critic is thrown back upon his personal feeling as the only remaining standard of evaluation. The public rules...Thus today art is becoming democratic” (“The Imagination of the Poet” 31-5). As in “The Child in the Vatican,” the overwhelming flood of historical artworks is simply the objective side of a widespread subjective confusion, a pervasive and dissociative solipsism resulting from the absence of stable standards of judgment. Dilthey, more explicitly than Lee, thus presents the image of aesthetic democracy without *sensus communis*, in which common forms have become impossible in the face of the “vulgar instincts of the masses” and their “low” desire for what he calls “gripping effects.”

Dilthey, again like Lee, argues that this crisis can be averted through an aesthetic education, but while Lee suggests in *Belcaro* that the masses can teach themselves simply by returning to the innocence of the student, Dilthey is too aware of

the theories of cognitive science to believe in a return to Eden. Instead, Dilthey suggests that as history and physio-psychology have created this aesthetic-political anarchy, its solution lies in a historicized psychology. Accordingly, in “The Imagination of the Poet” and in his 1892 “Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics,” Dilthey employs cognitive scientific theories in order to account for the historical variability of artistic forms and to discover “universally valid” aesthetic principles to guide poetic creation and critical evaluation amidst the vagaries of historical changes in taste. Attention to Dilthey’s project of a hermeneutic poetics can thus provide substantial aid in an understanding of Vernon Lee’s aesthetic essays. A comparative analysis demonstrates that Lee and Dilthey were separately responding to a common set of problems posed by cognitive science to historical knowledge and the politics of classical aesthetics. Moreover, Dilthey’s attempts to solve these problems by addressing “the historicity of psychic life” as it manifests itself in artistic forms and his investment in a form of aesthetic authoritarianism throw into relief Lee’s own historicized aesthetics and the competing principles underlying the aestheticist political and ethical programs she advances in her essays.

Dilthey’s essays model aesthetic forms on a perceptual semiotics—the “representations” through which cognition of the external world takes place. Arguing that the fundamental function of art is an affective symbolism—in which “an image itself or something akin to it represents a mental content, and this mental content takes on sensory concreteness in this image or one akin to it” (90)—Dilthey claims that association enables this affective symbolism and thus plays an indispensable role in aesthetic experience. Association deepens the power of a given representation to elicit an affective response by linking it with other representations and thus converting it into a repository of complex feelings and ideas. However, Dilthey also explicitly reworks the theory of association to bring it in line with physiological knowledge.

Dilthey pointedly distinguishes his revision of association by noting that earlier accounts assume that the associated elements—whether perceptions or sensations—are discrete, fixed, and given, whereas they are actually in flux. Perceptions and representations, Dilthey writes, “are permeated, colored, and enlivened by feelings.” These feelings and interests guide our attentiveness to experience, and thus they bring about “the appearance, gradual unfolding, and the disappearance of representations.” Our interested attention works on our representations, and thus “every representation is a *process*. Even the sensations which are connected in an image, and the relations existing among them, are subject to *inner transformations*” (68, emphasis in the original). The changing state of consciousness alters the elements it works on, so that representations are always in a state of becoming, and can never be repeated identically. Only those elements of an earlier perception that are “of interest” to consciousness in its present state will recur in a subsequent perception, so that “the same image can no more return than the same leaf can grow back on a tree the following spring” (102).⁷¹ This characterization of psychic processes—defined by a flux in which representations instantaneously decompose as the changing “interest” of consciousness dictates—raises the specter of exactly the formless aesthetic anarchy that Dilthey attempts to contain through his appeal to psychology. Accordingly, Dilthey is led to posit a conserving force to restrain these transformations, and here he turns to the theory of neural habits.

The theory of neural habits provides the basis for one of the most important concepts in Dilthey’s aesthetic essays: what he calls, “the acquired nexus of psychic life.” The nexus of psychic life is the hub of all the representations, feelings, and processes acquired through experience that mediate our experience of the external

⁷¹ Dilthey’s account the transformational force exerted by interest seems indebted to Shadworth Hodgson’s discussion of interest and association in *Time and Space*. See Hodgson, 266-7.

world. As Dilthey writes in “Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics,” “the sensory impression, even when it seems to affect us by itself, that is, to appear without reference to anything else, is intertwined with a dim nexus of representations, drives, and feelings in the background of my psychic life” (“Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics” 217). While the nexus of psychic life thus seems to be identical to the force at work in the transformations of perceptual and sensory experience, Dilthey makes clear that its action is bound insofar as the nexus is the result of a kind of neural *bildung*.

In explaining the development of the acquired nexus of psychic life, Dilthey rehearses the same *bildungsroman* of neural habit that pervades late nineteenth-century literature and neural science. As the child develops, Dilthey writes, a gap opens between the reflex action of stimulus and response. Gradually, stimuli become mediated, and thus are transformed into sensations, while formerly unconscious responses are cognized as desires. These sensations “eventually leave behind traces.” As these traces accumulate, “habits of feeling and desire are formed. Gradually, as the psyche develops, an *acquired nexus* of psychic life emerges between sensation and movement” (“The Imagination of the Poet” 97, emphasis in original). Dilthey here suggests that the acquired nexus of psychic life is composed of neural habits. As we have seen in chapter one, physiologists such as G.H. Lewes understood neural habits as pathways carved out within the nervous system and altered over time by repeated sensations. The gradual establishment of these neural grooves as repeated sensations engrave themselves on the nervous system serves as the necessary physical condition for the learned ability to purposefully manage and recognize sensations, but these pathways likewise determine and restrict how the mind registers new stimuli. For this reason, Lewes describes consciousness as a palimpsest: new sensations re-write the mind, but only on the basis of the text already inscribed there by previous sensations

or by neurological inheritance. Dilthey, adapting this theory, suggests that these neural habits are not tantamount to reflex action. As the habits of the nexus overlap one another, they enable more than one way of registering and cognizing a given stimulus, thus creating a zone of indeterminacy in which several different mental actions are possible (in this respect, Dilthey looks forward to Bergson's arguments in *Matter and Memory*, which I will take up in the next chapter). At the same time, the habits of Dilthey's psychic nexus bind the range of mental action to a set of stable, if slowly changing, usages and established ways of experiencing and perceiving the world.

The cost of this gambit, however, is that the *sensus communis* Dilthey preserves through an appeal to neural habit theory is radically circumscribed by history and culture. The invisible shaping force exerted by history and culture on cognition discloses the limits of any purely empirical aesthetics. The empirical effects of even the smallest components of any given aesthetic impression—"such as a line or a shape, a chord or a sequence of tones"—are in fact "conditioned by acquired habits." Given that "the impression embodies the results of a considerable amount of cognitive sense experience," Dilthey must acknowledge the very limited conclusions that can be drawn from his own aesthetic experience "as a person educated and historically conditioned in a certain context." The same limitations obtain for the same reasons in an analysis of the aesthetic impressions of larger groups. The reliability of any conclusion drawn from such aesthetic empiricism "remains geographically and temporally limited, and it remains so of necessity. Longstanding cognitive usages are embodied in our sense experience, and this can, over generations, produce judgments of taste which appear to be simple and immediate" ("Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics" 199). While Dilthey's concept of the acquired nexus of psychic life staves off the theoretical conclusion that sensory experience is ineluctably anarchic and

contingent, it reintroduces contingency in the form of an insurmountable cultural and historical relativism, rendering “universally valid” aesthetic principles impossible to discern.

Dilthey's responds to this impasse by supplementing his analysis of aesthetic impressions with an analysis of artistic production. Hence his primary aim in the aesthetic essays is to call for and tentatively sketch a hermeneutic poetics. Drawing on classical theories of aesthetic disinterestedness, Dilthey attempts to circumvent the problem of cultural relativism by exempting poets from the constraints of the habits constituting the acquired nexus of psychic life:

For a person whose images stand in relation to intended actions or knowledge to be attained, images are signs for something which occupies a determinate place in the calculation of his intentions or in the relations to what is knowable. But a poetic genius yields himself to lived experience or to an image with an independent interest in them, with a satisfaction in intuition, however frequently he may be distracted by external life or science. A poetic genius is like a traveler in a foreign land, who, with great enjoyment and complete freedom, abandons himself, without any utilitarian motives, to the surrounding impressions. (“The Imagination of the Poet” 61)

Dilthey here suggests that the poet escapes from historical and cultural determination exactly insofar as he resists employing a perceptual semiotics. Unlike the average person, who treats phenomena as signs to be unhesitatingly interpreted as custom and his routinized interests dictate, the poet disinterestedly focuses on phenomena without conceptualizing them or filling them out and completing them with Wundt's rich stores of memory. In doing so, the poet truly acts “like a traveler in a foreign land,” someone, that is, for whom all cultural norms of perception are alien. Dilthey, however, cannot sustain the poet's full exception from the rule of the acquired nexus

of psychic life. Estrangement from all norms of perception is a condition of extreme alienation analogous not just to foreign travel, but also to dreams, reveries, hallucinations, and madness. In each case, what is first of all impossible is access to the common sense or understanding of phenomena provided by the nexus of psychic life. As Dilthey acknowledges, the poet must be “bound by [norms of perception] if he is to satisfy his readers or listeners” (127).

Dilthey is thus at some pains to specify the conditions under which the poet transcends the nexus of psychic life and to distinguish the poet from the dreamer and the madman. The madman and the dreamer, he claims, experience a “diminution in the efficacy” of the nexus, while poetic production is “grounded in the efficacy of the acquired psychic nexus”; the activity of the poet consists of “a utilization of the nexus, which at the same time intentionally transcends the reality represented within it” (98). Dilthey suggests that the poet simultaneously employs and transcends the acquired nexus of psychic life by representing its action and thus raising it to conscious attention. In its normal functioning, the acquired psychic nexus is the invisible foundation of mental life: “although its constituents are not represented clearly and distinctly and its connections are not explicit, nevertheless its acquired picture of reality regulates our understanding of whatever impression our consciousness is occupied with” (97). An all-powerful and omnipresent shaping force, the acquired psychic nexus nevertheless remains below the threshold of consciousness. Neither clear, distinct, nor explicit, the nexus operates “unintentionally” and unreflectively. What is most significant about Dilthey’s poet is that he renders the action of the acquired psychic nexus visible by bringing its whole force to bear on a given representation, in a process Dilthey calls positive completion:

Only when the whole acquired psychic nexus becomes active can images be transformed on the basis of it: innumerable, immeasurable, almost

imperceptible changes occur in their nucleus. And in this way, the completion of the particular originates from the fullness of psychic life. Thus we obtain from images and their connections what is essential about a state of affairs; what gives it its meaning in the nexus of reality...[This is] the process of completion, by which *something outer is enlivened by something inner* or *something inner is made visible and intuitable by something outer*. (104, emphasis in original)

While positive completion seems similar to the kind of affective symbolism made possible by association—charging a given representation with feeling by linking it to another representation with affective content—Dilthey insists that positive completion differs by bringing the entire acquired psychic nexus into play. In positive completion a discrete change worked on the image is in any case irrelevant, by itself “almost imperceptible.” What positive completion offers instead is the spectacle of the acquired psychic nexus as it works, “unfolding” a representation with all the complexity of the nexus’ overlapping habits and processes. The poet transcends the acquired psychic nexus only in that he overcomes its partial and unconscious action, synthesizing and representing its processes in their totality.

The poet’s ability to represent the acquired psychic nexus is extremely important for Dilthey because it is this ability that offers a solution to the anarchy of modern aesthetic democracy. The “formless” state of late nineteenth-century Europe, flooded by an inassimilable multitude of forms from other cultures and historical periods, its coherence breaking down as the “vulgar masses” frantically search for the atomized thrills of “gripping effects,” simply represents an acute case of a recurrent social problem. Any “historical situation,” Dilthey argues, comprises “*a multiplicity of particular facts*.” They stand next to one another indifferently and cannot be traced back to one another” (161, emphasis in original). Any social entity at any moment

thus encompasses a set of disconnected conditions that it works to link together and coordinate through routine social interactions. The set of relations that thus emerges is, however, merely a loose system of “reciprocities and affinities”; unreflectively and unconsciously coordinated, the historical situation is the objective side of the overlapping habits and processes making up the acquired psychic nexus. The conscious and formal unity of the historical situation—what Dilthey calls the historical spirit of the age—can only be attained through the action of (artistic, philosophical, or political) “genius”: “knowledge or artistic creativity can produce a unity in, among, and between these indifferent facts—a unity which is made possible by this coordination of facts in a given age” (162, emphasis in original). The genius, like the poet, formalizes an unreflective set of relations that are already given, organizing and displaying the manifold of a historical situation so as to enable the self-conceptualization of a given historical period.

The activity of the poet in figuring the acquired psychic nexus not only provides the model for these feats of historical representation, it performs them at their most fundamental site: the mind itself. The coordinated system of interactions that make up the historical situation structures the cognitive norms embodied in the acquired psychic nexus. The acquired psychic nexus thus represents the historical situation. When the poet represents the psychic nexus in its totality and thus formalizes it, making it reflective, he is simultaneously figuring the historical *geist*. Dilthey concludes:

Psychologically, the contribution of the poetic genius is made possible by the fact that the acquired nexus of his psychic life is conditioned by the coordination of the constituents of an age. The nexus thus represents this coordination. In turn, the poetic processes taking place in consciousness and

their results...are conditioned by this acquired nexus and thus themselves represent this nexus. (163)

By elaborating a cognitive aesthetics, therefore, Dilthey is also elaborating a theory of social order under the conditions of modernity. The poet imposes an organizing form on the aesthetic anarchy of nineteenth-century European society by representing its representation.

The aesthetic education with which the poet thus reforms “the vulgar instincts of the masses” is guaranteed by Dilthey’s understanding of aesthetic reception. Dilthey insists that the reader or listener “re-creates” the poem, performing over again, though with a lesser intensity, the poet’s labor of feeling and composition. This insistence is undergirded by cognitive scientific theories of perception and sensory-motor response. Insofar as poetry’s fundamental function is affective symbolism, the reader obviously must experience the emotions that the poem expresses. More importantly, though, Dilthey’s understanding of reception as re-creation rests on the physiology of habit. Neural habits were thought to encompass not only the channels through which the nervous system filtered stimuli so as to transform them into sensations, but also motor-reflexes ancillary to such activity. To organize stimuli into sensation, therefore, necessarily included a set of muscular responses, and on this basis neuroscientists suggested that the sensory interpretation of phenomena such as language required a certain amount of motor re-enactment.⁷² Bergson summarizes this theory in *Matter and Memory*, using the example of learning a foreign language. The foreign language at first presents an indistinguishable welter of phenomena, in which

⁷² Physiologists argued that full motor-reenactment was typically suppressed, and only a ghostly, incomplete version was initiated as the relevant nervous channels processing stimuli became excited. In *The Functions of the Brain*, for example, Ferrier argues that “we think of form by initiating and then inhibiting the movements of the eyes or hands through which by which ideas of form have been gained and persist... We recall an object in idea by pronouncing the name in a suppressed manner.” See Ferrier 286.

discrete words and even syllables are impossible to separate from one another. To organize them requires “automatic movements of internal accompaniment...sketching a simplified figure in which the listener would find...the very movements of the speaker.” Bergson calls these movements of accompaniment “the motor diagram” of heard speech.⁷³ Dilthey, like a range of other aesthetic theorists in the late nineteenth century, including Lee, applied the theory of motor diagrams to aesthetic response. In his poetics, the poet’s formalizing organization of the acquired psychic nexus is repeated by, and thereby inscribed in, the body of every reader.

The mechanism of imitation thus orders the chaos of aesthetic democracy. In implicitly making this claim, Dilthey draws from Gabriel Tarde, the French sociologist who was the first person to take sensory-motor habits as the basis for a systematic theory of social order. “Society is imitation,” Tarde argues. Re-enactments of observed behavior constitute the hidden mainspring of political, economic, and cultural life by creating the norms of behavior and perception on which any social interaction relies. “Just as a man does not see, listen, walk, stand, write, [or] play the flute...except by means of many co-ordinated muscular memories, so a society could not exist or change or advance a single step unless it possessed an untold store of blind routine and slavish imitation which was constantly being added to by successive generations.”⁷⁴ Such imitation is largely unconscious; the social man is thus a “veritable somnambulist” living out a dream of spontaneous volition while in reality bound to unreflective convention in the very fibers of his being. These relatively homogenous customs and conventions of modern Europe were produced by

⁷³ See *Matter and Memory* 110-1. Bergson, I should note, complicates this model, arguing that, given the role played in perception by memory and expectation, the motor diagram of heard speech is guided by the perceiving subject’s assumptions about the speaker’s meaning.

⁷⁴ See Tarde 75. While *The Laws of Imitation* was published in 1890, I focus here on the chapter “What is a Society?”, which was first published as an essay in *Revue Philosophique* in 1884, three years before Dilthey’s *The Imagination of the Poet*.

charismatic leaders, whose “prestige” subordinated an original refractory social heterogeneity into a governable, unified society by “fascinating” all who came into their orbit. On the basis of such involuntary consensus, mimetic democracy emerges as the prestige and power of fascination that had been concentrated in the charismatic leaders are dispersed among the people at large. Tarde’s account of the progress of imitation, like Dilthey’s account of the development of poetic forms, thus tells the story of how a *sensus communis* is made so that a democracy, aesthetic or otherwise, can emerge.

In both Tarde’s mimetic democracy and Dilthey’s aesthetic democracy there is a deep strain of authoritarianism. Tarde not only argues that the common sense underpinning democracy results from the authoritarian control of charismatic leaders—whose authority he thoroughly naturalizes as the power of fascination—he also suggests that democracy itself should be transcended in a return to authoritarian rule. Tarde finds himself “pessimistic” about the prospect that expanded opportunities for education and employment for women and the poor will prompt both groups to abandon “their” necessary labor, leading to a time when “we shall be without agricultural laborers, without nurses, and even without mothers who can or will nourish the continually decreasing number of their children” (66). He therefore urges that a return to enforced hierarchy will be inevitable to correct the effects of this misguided pursuit of equality, and that “equality is only a transition between two hierarchies” (73). While Dilthey’s politics are comparatively inoffensive, he nonetheless takes liberally from Tarde’s theory of imitation and likewise makes clear that the common sense underwriting his aesthetic democracy results from the guiding hand of “genius.” It is, he writes, “by means of [the personality of genius] that we understand the language of sensuous manifestations and read the gestures and actions of men; by means of [the personality of genius] the inner meaning of everything outer,

and ultimately of the entire phenomenal world is opened up for other men” (211).

Through the mechanism of imitation, our aesthetic education always occurs under the strict tutelage of the charismatic artist.

Dilthey’s authoritarian aesthetic democracy nonetheless constrains the power of the poet according to the prevailing habits of the acquired psychic nexus, and the dispersed power of habit thereby threatens to undermine his project of discovering universally valid aesthetic principles subtending the historical and cultural differences in artistic forms. In Tarde’s mimetic democracy, once the power of fascination wielded by the charismatic leader has been distributed throughout a society, fascination itself is conditioned by the prevailing habits of perception and imitation.⁷⁵ Similarly, Dilthey’s aesthetic democracy is founded on the principle that the poet transcends the acquired psychic nexus of a given historical moment only by formalizing it and representing its operations. This move both invests the poet with the power to shape a society and limits that power to merely making that society’s shape explicit. Moreover, since a poem and its reading are thus conditioned by their respective historical and cultural origins, Dilthey cannot fully solve the problem of historical and cultural relativism that his essay addresses. He consequently slips into an agnosticism about whether a poem that represents the nexus of a given period could ever do so for a reader whose habits of perception are conditioned by the nexus of a later period.⁷⁶ In his attempts to secure the stability of common sense for late

⁷⁵ Anticipating Dilthey’s description of the poet as foreign traveler, Tarde claims that an awakening from the somnambulism of imitation and the consequent introduction of new forces into the closed system of mimetic democracy is only possible outside of one’s customary social environment in a “super-social” isolation or among an “alien society” (88, 79). Yet just as in the case of Dilthey’s poet, it is not at all clear how, according to the habit theory Tarde draws from, the innovations brought back from such super-social excursions would be perceptible without passing through just those mimetic habits that they have supposedly transcended.

⁷⁶ Dilthey claims that art forms enable a historical culture to “become thematic both to itself and to us” but he also suggests that “when a new social order has been instituted...the poets of the preceding epoch no longer move us as they once moved their contemporaries” (163, 173). He is also hard pressed to square his account of changing modes of perception with the supposedly “eternal” greatness of canonical figures.

nineteenth-century Europe in the midst of social upheaval by grounding it in neural habits, Dilthey is led to the tentative but seemingly inescapable conclusion that the past is truly a foreign country.

1887, the same year that Dilthey published “The Imagination of the Poet,” also saw the publication of *Juvenilia*, Lee’s second collection of aesthetic essays that begins with her reconsideration of association and aesthetics. While association must be excluded in the *bildungsroman* of the aesthete that Lee recounts in “The Child in the Vatican,” in *Juvenilia* Lee argues that association is the source and process of *bildung* itself. Clearly now aware of the sensory instabilities discovered by cognitive science, Lee identifies association as the force that builds up the solidity of perceptions and of the self from the churning flux of sensations:

[Association] is the action which is for ever making the firm soil of our mind; by collecting round the microscopic present all the floatsam of the past, the action which is perpetually preventing the sea of constantly undulating experiences, atoms of sensation and reflection for ever changing place like drops in the ocean, from reabsorbing everything which might become a permanently existing idea, a definite emotion, a solid form...The wave of association may deprive us ever and anon of some addition to the little islet of wisdom and beauty in our lives; but had there not been that wave tossing the past to the present, no solid wisdom or beauty, nay, no individuality of ourselves would have existed at all. (55-6)

Aptly employing the figure of waves, Lee here describes a world that has dissolved into a random and meaningless distribution of forces, a world of pure physics. Association solidifies portions of this world, building up both consciousness and the objects we perceive by allowing the fleeting, present sensations within the flow of our atomized impressions to bond with the sensations we have previously experienced.

This feat of brain-building results from an accretion of cognitions in which each new perception is made possible by previous ones. Past impressions thus operate as principles of selection that determine what it is possible for our minds to grasp: “What we catch hold of with our mind is not that which is new, which belongs to today; but that which is old, and belongs to yesterday... We wander, as it were, through a vast and populous city; those that we notice and speak to are our old acquaintance; but the old acquaintance introduce new ones, whom we admit for their sake” (61). Far from the dispersive, distracting force of *Belcaro*, association in *Juvenilia* focuses attention and provides the means for the grouping and stabilizing of sensations.

Lee clearly revises her arguments about association on the basis of greater familiarity with cognitive scientific accounts of perception. Her account of association as structuring present perceptions through past impressions makes it clear that association fulfills the same task here as in Wundt’s and Helmholtz’s work: it is the mechanism for the acquisition and use of the “rich stores of memory” that construct a stable world from the necessarily fragmented and unstable sense-experience of the body. Lee grounds these rich stores of memory not just in a psychological process but in the neural pathways of the body. In “Botticelli at the Villa Lemmi,” the essay following her opening defense of association in *Juvenilia*, Lee writes that “completely new impressions are not perceived, since the very organs of perception are formed by the repetition of a but slightly varying act of perceiving” (108). The process of constructive, gradually shifting, repetitive perception evoked here is that of association, but this process shapes the “organs of perception” themselves, as well as the psychological capacity for specific cognitions. In making this claim, Lee signals that her understanding of association draws from the primarily

Anglo-American cognitive theorists who argued that association is grounded in the physiology of neural habits.⁷⁷

“On Novels,” an essay appearing in Lee’s 1886 collection, *Baldwin*, demonstrates Lee’s familiarity with the theory of neural habits. In that essay, Lee employs the concept of neural pathways in order to account for the social and psychological effects of novel-reading. Defining the primary interest of novel-reading as social and psychological, rather than aesthetic, so that her theory of novel-reading can evade her strictures on explicitly moral or social considerations in the domain of art, Lee argues that novels play an especially significant role in the processes of cognitive development that refine our capacity for feelings and their reflective discrimination. Novels, with their special focus on psychic interiority and affective response, spur such development by “playing upon our emotions” and directing our attention to these emotional states, thus inducing in us both new affective states and a more reflective appreciation of their subtleties. Employing the rhetoric of neural pathways, Lee describes novelists as “people who have taught mankind to see the broad channels along which its feelings move, who have dug those channels” (*Baldwin* 210-3, 221-3).

Lee accords novelists an especially prominent role in establishing affective habits because she invests them with the power to command and manage the reader’s attention.⁷⁸ “Life,” she argues, cannot inscribe the mind as lastingly or effectively as literature because our typical experiences are fragmentary and overlapping, and we receive them with the mind “not tense, but slack,” in a state of dispersed, “constantly diverted” attention, so that “the things which are washed on to our consciousness,

⁷⁷ In *The Principles of Psychology*, for example, William James argues that metonymic or contiguous association is an effect of neural habits (James 563). For a similar argument, see also Carpenter, 343-5.

⁷⁸ In this respect, Lee seems to corroborate Garrett Stewart’s argument that the form of the Victorian novel strives to have its reader “always potentially *at attention*.” See Stewart, 46.

floating on the stream, by the one wave, are washed off again by another wave.” In receiving the impressions of literature, on the other hand, the mind is “tense...broad awake, on the alert,” so that we give to each impression our exclusive attention. Literary impressions are thus attentively experienced by the intellect, which “graves into itself” these impressions as “the essential, the selected, the thing to be preserved and revived,” and thereby bestows on them the “property of haunting the imagination, of determining the judgment” (221-2). Lee suggests that as we engrave these focused sense impressions into the mind, they become “types” or “generalizations,” and thus, implicitly, abstractions that mediate experience by serving as templates for our perceptions. Our attentiveness while reading thereby shapes the focus of our attention in the subsequent experiences of daily life. In ascribing to the novelist the power to focalize the minds of his readers during and after the act of reading, Lee participates in the larger late nineteenth-century project, described at length in Crary’s *Suspensions of Perception*, of engineering techniques to manage attention.⁷⁹ Lee’s suggestion that the novelist dictates the reader’s sense of what is “essential” in her impressions obviously shares many assumptions with Dilthey’s claim that the poet reveals to his readers the “inner meaning” of the phenomenal world.⁸⁰ Like Dilthey in his aesthetic essays, Lee thus turns to neural habit theory in “On Novels” partly in the service of theorizing an authoritarian project to shape and manage a cognitive field of common sense.

Lee’s subsequent rethinking of the role of association in what she considered properly aesthetic experience extends her attempt to theorize an authoritarian aesthetic education. This preoccupation underlies her essay on aesthetic environments,

⁷⁹ Crary notes that structure of attention, which is continuous with states of distraction and reverie, dooms this project to failure from its very beginning.

⁸⁰ While Lee could not have been aware of Tarde’s arguments when she wrote the essays in *Belcaro*, she does there employ the concept of unconscious imitation, arguing that when experiencing an artwork aesthetically, the aesthete involuntarily seeks to increase her pleasure by “creating the work of art over again in the intensity of appreciation” (62).

“Botticelli at the Villa Lemmi.” Building there on her claim that progressive repetitions form the organs of perception, Lee argues that in order to experience aesthetic impressions at their full intensity, “there must already exist in our life a habit of impression akin to those given wholesale by art...[and] there must be in the manner in which artistic impressions are presented to us something familiar, something analogous to the manner in which we obtain the ordinary inartistic impressions of life” (108-9). In other words, aesthetic experience requires not only that we bring to the artwork the proper perceptual habits from our daily lives, but also that the artwork itself be presented to us in circumstances similar to those that make up our daily lives. The latter point comprises the main argument of this essay, whose occasion is Lee’s annoyance and uneasiness at the removal of Botticelli’s frescoes from the dilapidated former scullery of the Villa Lemmi, where they had been painted, to the galleries of the Louvre. This essay thus rehearses Lee’s attacks on the museum space in “The Child in the Vatican,” but here Lee suggests that habits of association can help spectators provide the artworks with a “fitting habitation in [the] fancy.” Especially effective in this regard is the Arts and Crafts movement, which, Lee writes, is “train[ing] innumerable men and women into an habitual perception of beauty, without which they must wander through all the galleries provided for them by the nation with mere vacant, unfamiliar wonder, and leave them as poor of durable artistic impressions as they entered them” (113). Lee suggests that the decorative arts determine habits of aesthetic impression through the influence of aesthetic habitations. “Botticelli at the Villa Lemmi” thus taps into the late Victorian discourses around aesthetic environments that, as Douglas Mao has compellingly demonstrated, were primarily concerned with employing engineered spaces to shape and define character (Mao 18-108). Lee suggests that the perceptual and aesthetic habits acquired from such managed environments function to rein in the more extravagant interpretations of

association, serving as guarantees against its tendency to “seek in statue or picture...[for] utterly gratuitous suggestion” (112). The significance of aesthetic environments for Lee thus becomes clear: decorative artists, like novelists, manage the development of our association-pathways, ensuring that a stable and shared cognitive field emerges in spite of the apparent randomness of association. That association proceeds through neural habits manageable in this way is the necessary condition for Lee’s reconsideration of it in *Juvenilia*. If association were not susceptible to such control, Lee could not have used it to shore up aesthetic experience against those uncertainties of sense that neuroscience had by this time irreversibly established.

It is this construction of a precarious common sense that leads Lee to the conclusion that aesthetic experience has a history. This history comprises not only those interactions of a given subject with her environment and those encounters with aesthetic objects that have formed her association-pathways, but also those of her progenitors. Lee follows the physiologists who argued that neural habits were inheritable. Employing the Lamarckian model of “soft inheritance,” British physiologists, especially, argued that neural habits are already latent prior to a given individual’s experience because specific neural dispositions are passed on as hereditary traits (Carpenter 342). G.H. Lewes, for example, writes in *Problems of Life and Mind* that “all sensations, perceptions, emotions, volitions, are partly connate, partly acquired; partly the evolved products of the accumulated experiences of ancestors, and partly of the accumulated experiences of the individual, when each of these have left *residua* in the modifications of the [nervous] structure” (*Problems of Life and Mind* 111). Lee, like Lewes, therefore represents consciousness as a palimpsest, only partially re-written as neural habits are incrementally altered. Insofar as racial inheritance thus shapes the individual’s neural habits, her association-pathways are bound even more tightly to an authoritative set of norms, but this

common sense also changes over time as new deposits of *residua* accumulate. While this aesthetic common sense is made possible by neural habit theory, then, neural habit theory also suggests that aesthetic experience is historical, the contingent product of sensory-perceptual norms that change over time.

The contingency of this common sense worries Lee in *Juvenilia*, where she expresses concern that aesthetic experience is burdened by history, constrained by the network of accumulated association-pathways that intervene between the aesthete and the artwork she experiences. Lee's appeal to association aimed to stave off social fragmentation and solipsism by grounding sense-experience in a shared set of association-pathways. In turning to theories that figured the mind as a palimpsest, Lee's goal had thus been to ensure that the mind cannot treat the artwork as a *tabula rasa*, "a blank sheet of paper on which we write what comes into our head, and which itself can tell us nothing." This move sets Lee up to suffer an ironic reversal. For if the aesthete can no longer use the artwork as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which to scrawl random associations, this is only because she finds it already covered with them, written over with multi-layered habits of feeling, a palimpsest of graffiti.

Lee's turn to association in order to preserve *sensus communis* opens a gap between artistic intention and aesthetic effect that yawns particularly wide in the case of historical aesthetic objects. While shared aesthetic and moral standards are preserved, then, this very common sense makes it impossible to grasp the artwork as a communicative object or utterance. In the essay "Perigot," for example, Lee worries that late nineteenth-century readers can no longer "fairly judge" Shakespeare's plays:

In order to do so, we must, so far as we can, remove the network of thoughts and feelings with which each succeeding generation of critics, of actors, and of readers have overlaid the original work. I sometimes doubt whether, even after all our trouble, we could see the real Shakespeare, so utterly have we corrupted

the text of what he represents to our soul. The many scholars and societies who labor to give us back the original word and meaning of what he wrote are, in reality, defeating their own object: every explanation is virtually an interpolation, an alteration, and Shakespeare's plays are by this time one mass of such interpolations and alterations. (264-5)

Lee's claim that "every" act of interpretation interpolates a text comes close to the concerns about the randomness of individual association in *Belcaro*, but here it is the cumulative effect of these individual readings, their cohesion into a network of perceptions, that palimpsestically effaces the text of Shakespeare's plays. As Lee goes on to explain, moreover, it is not merely the critical or dramatic interpretations of Shakespeare that rewrite his plays, but also the cultural habits of reading that have been cultivated by other art forms and texts, most especially the novel: "perception, in all things, is a matter of practice...and we have been trained for two centuries...to understand Stendhal, and Balzac, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot" (274). The very novelists who have dug the channels along which our common feelings move have bounded those feelings by historical period. The same problem of the historical relativism of psychic life that challenged Dilthey appears in *Juvenilia*, as Lee arrives at the conclusion that art works or ways of knowing that originate outside the horizons of a common sense are almost necessarily misjudged with them. Almost. Despite her skepticism and the seeming impossibility of the task, Lee enjoins the reader to remove "so far as [she] can...the network of thoughts and feelings" that have been internalized in the nervous system as the pathways of association. Lee does not explain how this might be accomplished according to her theory, but this injunction to erase the palimpsest of neural habits—a sort of *bildung* in reverse—should be familiar to readers of Victorian aestheticism. To make the mind a tabula rasa is a goal of the Paterian aesthete.

Lee's attempts to elaborate a psychological aesthetics in *Juvenilia* thus seem to arrive with Dilthey at the same dead ends: an aesthetic democracy seemingly possible only through the authoritarian power of art to inculcate a common sense in the public, yet this same common sense constraining artworks and their power of influence through its inescapable historical and cultural relativism. However, there is an alternate strain of argument in *Juvenilia* that, in contrast to Dilthey, embraces the indeterminacy of association as enabling a mode of aesthetic freedom and privacy that resists both the restrictive perceptual norms of common sense and the authoritarian capacity of the artist to command attention. In "Perigot," the same essay in which Lee enjoined the aesthete to erase her own palimpsest of habits so as to judge Shakespeare fairly, Lee also suggests that these association-pathways act as a crucial check on art's power of fascination. Worrying that increased nervous sensitivity has rendered contemporary play-goers vulnerable to being overwhelmed by representations of emotions too powerful for them to bear, Lee contrasts the invasion of "moral privacy" by theatrical representations with the experience of reading novels, which likewise aim at the representation of psychological and emotional states in all their fineness of detail.

The [distinction], to my mind, lies exactly in the difference between the thing which is read and the thing which is actually witnessed. In the case of the play the actor does the realizing, and to his realizing we are forced to submit...In reading a book we usually realize only so much as we can bear; each reader, in point of fact, selecting automatically that which shall most impress him; or rather, details gravitating to the mind, flying to it like needles to a magnet, according as there exists a natural affinity between them and it...We respond to the author's suggestion, we do one half of the work, and do it, inevitably, in the way least painful to ourselves. Moreover, in this intellectual

representation, our mind is appealed to, not our nerves; and our mind grasps, welds into an harmonious whole, healthy and enduring, a whole state of feeling or a whole character, instead of having merely the outer expression thereof hurled violently at us. (260-1)

Although the act of reading here proceeds “automatically,” through the interpretive reflex action of perception, it nonetheless entails a greater degree of freedom and aesthetic activity—the reader does half the work in “realizing” or interpreting the text whereas the play-goer passively submits to the actor’s construction. While the action of this associative reading initially occurs below the threshold of reflective volition, it enables a fuller realization of the meaning of the artwork as the mind synthesizes a “whole state of feeling, or a whole character” out of discrete gestures or expressions. By distancing the reader from the full power of unmediated sensation, association becomes a means for the reader to thus “master the situation,” ensuring that she is not overwhelmed by “the mere momentary physical expression” (261-2).

While Lee suggests in “Perigot” that the act of reading enables this form of aesthetic agency, it is clear from the broader context of this claim that she is describing a mode of aesthetic reception that is *like* reading, one that is applicable to other kinds of sense-experience. Lee’s description of reading as an involuntary process of selection—of choosing details from an aesthetic object around which the reader organizes her impressions—invokes what G.H. Lewes called “the law of interest.” At its most basic, this law is simply the physio-psychological principle that within a given field of stimuli, a subject cognizes those sensations and objects in which he has an interest. Late nineteenth-century cognitive science defined “interest” partly as simple advantage, so that the subject perceiving according to its interests only recognizes what is useful to itself. Interest was thus often represented as almost instinctive: functioning reflexively to guide and orient physical action, interest was

frequently treated as synonymous with neural habits.⁸¹ That all perception is *interested* in this sense is one of the major arguments in *Matter and Memory*, in which Bergson identifies the law of interest as the key principle underlying sensory-motor habits. Yet “interest” also denotes the feeling accompanying or arousing attention. This second sense of the term implied something very different about mental action, since many of these same philosophers and physio-psychologists were in the process of constructing attention as a mode of mental agency and perceptual synthesis transcending the mere reflex action of habit.⁸² These two very different meanings of interest tend to shade into one another in late nineteenth-century cognitive scientific writings, as they do in Lee’s account of reading above, where a process that begins as involuntary and reflexive ends with the reader mastering and synthesizing her impressions. Reading as Lee describes it in “Perigot” is a version of interested perception. While Dilthey, as we have seen, describes a similar form of interested perception at work in the nexus of psychic processes, the role of mastery and synthesis is there given to the poetic genius, rather than his readers. Lee here gives that role to the reading subject explicitly as an ethic, a technology of the self. Proceeding partly through reflexive association and partly through attentive synthesis, Lee’s reading subject, like the attentive one, purposefully limits mental action to a restricted set of phenomena within a larger field of stimuli in order to master that field and herself more effectively.

Elsewhere in *Juvenilia*, Lee extends this logic into a defense of interested perception that locates freedom in the refusal to allow artworks to manage attention.

⁸¹ Here, for instance, is Lewes on the law of interest and neural pathways: “The satisfaction of desire is that which both impels and quiets mental movement. Were it not for this controlling effect of the established pathways, every excitation would be indefinitely irradiated throughout the whole organism” (*Problems of Life and Mind* 112).

⁸² William James employs interest in this sense in his concept of the “selective agency of interested attention.” See James 572-583.

As contemporary critics such as Crary have demonstrated, attention is finally inseparable from distraction. Insofar as attention presumes the narrowing of a cognitive field, the extreme focalization of a small part of a broad range of stimuli, any state of attention is also a state of distraction, of ignoring or failing to cognize whatever surrounds the point of focus.⁸³ Lee seems to have understood this quite well; in extolling the negative liberty of interested perception, she suggests this liberty is constituted by the freedom to be distracted during aesthetic experience. Echoing her distinction in “Perigot” between novels and plays, in “Botticelli at the Villa Lemmi” Lee contrasts concerts and operas on the basis of each form’s capacity to encourage distraction. Concerts, like plays, demand the continuous “attention of the ear” without providing the intermittent relief of stimulation for the other senses, so that “our minds are tied as with a ligature” and melodies are “forced upon us whether we be fit to enjoy them or not.” Operas, on the other hand, are like read texts in that they allow the mind to wander. Operas encourage the spectator to select points of focus amongst the music, the sets, the costumes, the actors’ gestures, and the other audience-members, so that the mind is given room to “freely” direct its attention and “melodies may be taken or left at will.” To illustrate the distinction between these two means of presentation, Lee employs the same metaphor she uses earlier in *Juvenilia* as a figure for associative perception: that of freely wandering through a town and selectively noticing its inhabitants. “The difference between an opera and a concert,” she writes, “is that between a town, with all its trivial details and its statues and pictures here and there, and an awful expanse of gallery” (124-6).

The reappearance of the museum space in the midst of Lee’s defense of interested perception marks the limit of her attempts to explore the convergence of

⁸³ Thus Crary argues that “attention and distraction cannot be thought outside a continuum in which the two ceaselessly flow into one another” (51). For a similar argument in reference to the act of reading specifically, see Dames 73-122.

cognitive science and aesthetics. Lee does not, to be sure, consistently hew to the claims she makes for interested perception; even within the same essays, Lee makes arguments that conflict with these claims about its virtues. In all of Lee's essays, she tends to assume contradictory positions as she logically follows out the implications of a given idea. However, this tendency makes the essays in *Juvenilia* into vivid dramatizations of the broader contradictions in the project of elaborating a cognitive aesthetic democracy. In Lee's arguments for interested perception, association is an important aesthetic mode for the very same reasons that Lee had earlier tried to distinguish it from aesthetic experience. Here association enables the aesthete to take an active, interpretive role in aesthetic experience, to "do half the work." Put another way, association is the means by which the aesthete constructs her own version of the artwork by selecting and supplementing elements of the original. This mode of aesthetic experience is not disinterested. It does not judge artworks "fairly," or concern itself with the artwork as a communicative utterance with a moral claim to full and impartial attention. Since its distribution of attention includes an irreducibly random component, it participates only obliquely in anything like a stable *sensus communis*. Yet its value for Lee derives from her commitment to unmistakably liberal principles of self-development and negative liberty. In this respect, Lee's endorsement of interested perception bears witness to the collapse of Victorian aesthetic democracy and looks forward to Wilde's writings from the 1890s.

It also looks towards the potential reconciliation of aesthetic experience and history. Lee's account of interested perception—interpretive, selectively attentive, synthesizing—is in many ways a fair account of her historiographical methods before and after *Belcaro*. In this respect, Lee's cognitive aesthetics point her towards the subject of her essay, published in the 1890s, "The Puzzles of the Past." There, Lee asks "whether the Past ever really did exist," and concludes that it probably did not.

Instead, the past, like the artwork for the interested aesthete, is in fact “a creation of our own...not merely in its details, but in what is far more important, in its essential, emotional, and imaginative quality and value” (*Hortus Vitae* 196).

CHAPTER 5
UNCHAINED HARMONY:
WALTER PATER'S ETHICS OF INFLUENCE

To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike.

—Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*

And was it that Gaston too was a less independent ruler of his own mental world than he had fancied, that he derived his impressions of things not directly from them, but mediately from other people's impressions about them, and he needed the pledge of their assents to ratify his own?

—Walter Pater, *Gaston de Latour*

In the above epigraph from the notorious conclusion to his 1873 study, *The Renaissance*, Walter Pater follows his most infamously bold and stirring claim with one that seems heavily qualified, even by Paterian standards. “*In a sense it might even be said*”: these dual conditions suggest the tentativeness with which Pater approached this assertion identifying habit with failure. Pater's wariness here stems from the implicit challenge this claim mounts against the broad Victorian consensus that the formation of good habits was both the means and the end of ethical practice. At Victorian Oxford, where Pater was a fellow at Brasenose Collge, this consensus derived its authority from Aristotle's *Ethics*, in which Aristotle argued not only that

moral virtue is acquired by habit, but also that it consists of habits: voluntarily cultivated dispositions towards emotions, desires, and acts that prompt both virtuous actions and pleasure in their performance.⁸⁴ Ironically, while Aristotle identifies virtue with habit because habits are consciously and voluntarily acquired—in distinction from faculties and states of emotion—Pater identifies habits with failure because habits are insufficiently reflective. Transposing habit from the domain of action to that of perception, Pater suggests that habit falsifies impressions because it fosters an inattentiveness to their details.⁸⁵ Like language, habit unreflectively invests impressions with the “solidity” of objects. Habit’s inattentiveness prevents one from “know[ing] one’s own impression as it really is,” and it is thus at odds with the goal and process of education as Pater describes it in the preface to *The Renaissance*: to increase “our susceptibility to these impressions...in depth and variety.”

Only five years after the publication of *The Renaissance*, however, Pater reimagined the aesthetics of habit in his 1878 mini-*bildungsroman*, “The Child in the House.”⁸⁶ This story details the “process of brain building” by which its protagonist, Florian Deleal, formed his character by interacting with the environment of his childhood home. Pater refers to Florian’s retrospective reconstruction of this process as “tracing back the threads of his complex spiritual habit.” Here and throughout the story, Pater draws mainly on three related meanings of habit—as mental or moral

⁸⁴ This identification of moral virtue and habit survives etymologically in “ethics”, from *ethos*, which in Ancient Greek denotes both character and habit. See *The Nicomachean Ethics* 31-49. On the importance of Aristotle’s *Ethics* in Victorian Oxford, see Turner 322-367. Discussing this passage in “De Profundis,” Wilde confirms that “the dull Oxford people thought the phrase a mere willful inversion of the somewhat wearisome text of Aristotelian *Ethics*,” though Pater’s caginess here likely has more reference to the well-founded suspicion that the passage would be read as an attack not just on Aristotelian ethics but ethics generally. See “De Profundis” 879.

⁸⁵ Pater’s transposition of habit in effect erases Aristotle’s distinction between faculties and virtues. Whereas faculties such as vision and hearing are simply given for Aristotle and do not depend on practice to function, Victorian cognitive science had demonstrated that sensory faculties are shaped by repeated acts of perception and are in this sense acquired.

⁸⁶ “The Child in the House” was published five years after *The Renaissance* but ten years after Pater published the passages making up his “Conclusion” in a separate essay on William Morris.

character, as vestment or bodily constitution, and, more rarely, as habitation—whose interplay undergirds the story’s central trope: that Florian’s “house of thought” emerges from his material habitation. While in the conclusion to *The Renaissance* habit dulls aesthetic susceptibility, this is not the case in “The Child in the House”: “our susceptibilities, the discovery of our powers, manifold experiences...belong to this or the other well-remembered place in the material habitation...and the early habitation thus gradually becomes a sort of material shrine or sanctuary of sentiment; a system of visible symbolism interweaves itself through all our thoughts and passions; and irresistibly, little shapes, voices, accidents...become part of the great chain wherewith we are bound” (6). Here, the repeated interaction with our material habitation develops and defines our susceptibilities, and our habitual impressions of the objects making up that habitation gradually evolve themselves into a system of signs interwoven with our mental and emotional life. Far from being at variance with aesthetic experience, habit is intimately involved in the growth of Florian’s aesthetic receptivity. As the force that interweaves a system of visible symbolism with Florian’s thoughts and feelings, habit creates a mode of perception in him that seems identical to the mode of aesthetic receptivity that Pater, in “The School of Giorgione,” calls “the ‘imaginative reason,’ that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol.”⁸⁷ At the same time, Pater signals his ambivalence towards this process of brain-building in the metamorphosis of the threads of this interwoven system of symbolic impressions into “the great chain wherewith we are bound.” Binding here suggests both the cohesion and coherence of a defined character as well as its restraint and limitation. As a binding force at work in

⁸⁷ Pater takes the name of this faculty from Matthew Arnold, who suggests that the imaginative reason, a dialectical combination of pagan sensuousness and rationality with medieval Christian sympathetic imaginativeness, is the defining faculty of the modern spirit. See “Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment” 155-176.

Florian's brain-building, habit seems to form a trammeling system that restricts, even if it simultaneously develops, the capacity for experience.

This chapter analyzes the relations between ethics and aesthetics in Walter Pater's writings. In Pater's writing as in late Victorian culture, habit plays important and related roles in constructions of ethical virtue, cultural norms, and aesthetic perception. Cognitive and behavioral habits were widely identified as the set of tacit rules and norms that stabilize and provide coherence for a given culture. Habit, as William James memorably put it, "is thus the enormous fly-wheel of Society, its most precious conservative agent" (James 121). In Aristotelian ethics and the Victorian moral programs and discourses influenced by them, habits are cultivated as both the means and end of moral character.⁸⁸ Underlying both these dimensions of habit is the psycho-physiological concept of neural habits: the channels inscribed in the nervous system by repeated experience and neural inheritance.⁸⁹ Pater draws explicitly on this concept of habit in "The Child in the House," especially in his punning characterization of *bildung* as brain-building and his use of a neural metaphoric in the story's extensive troping on threads and weaving. Habit is thus a key site in Pater's attempts to clarify and develop his aesthetic arguments and their relations to moral norms and cultural tradition. This chapter follows Pater's efforts, in response to the public furor that greeted *The Renaissance*, to reconcile his commitments to aesthetic negative liberty and attention to the unique details of each aesthetic experience with participation in the perceptual norms and habits undergirding ethics and community in

⁸⁸ For an example of how pervasive Aristotelian ethics are in Victorian discourses about morality, see William Kingdon Clifford's "On the Scientific Basis of Morals" 297-299, and "Right and Wrong: the Scientific Grounds of their Distinction" 300-338. In both essays, Clifford's efforts to explain the scientific basis of morals tacitly assume an Aristotelian ethical model.

⁸⁹ Moral and cultural norms were thus understood to rest on a physiological foundation in late Victorian culture. Walter Bagehot, for example, argued that "the transmitted nerve element" is "the 'connective tissue' of civilization...the continuous force which binds age to age." In his Oxford notebooks, Wilde suggests that the same is true of ethics when he remarks, "Aristotle's theory of habit may be said to have given ethics a physical basis." See *Physics and Politics* 8; and *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks* 121.

late Victorian culture. I begin with a reading of Pater's 1877 essay, "The School of Giorgione," in which he famously claims that all art aspires to the condition of music in order to facilitate "pure perception." Juxtaposing Pater's pure perception with similar concepts in the work of Wilhelm Wundt and Henri Bergson, I argue that Pater evolves his idea of pure perception by drawing from scientific accounts of harmony as a model of perceptual synthesis. I chart Pater's development of this concept in "The Child in the House" before turning to his 1885 novel, *Marius the Epicurean*, where Pater attempts to reconcile his aestheticism with the imperatives of common sense by elaborating a theory of aesthetic influence—the process by which beautiful objects or persons mold the aesthete's perception into a common form. While influence seems to abridge the aesthete's agency, I argue that Pater's turn to scientific studies of harmony allows him to theorize a form of influenced aesthetic experience in which the aesthete brings a concrete sense impression into relation with perceptual norms making up a *sensus communis* without fully merging it with them, and thus retains both the unique specificity of that impression and at least a degree of his own negative liberty of perception.

Harmony and Pure Perception

"The School of Giorgione" has long been read as an instance of Pater's formalism at its most uncompromising. The essay attempts to position his aestheticism in opposition to two types of Victorian art criticism: didactic popular criticism, which tended to appraise paintings based on their narrative content and its usefulness for moral or civic instruction, and the new scientific criticism, which

brought new scientific assumptions and methods of verification to bear on artworks.⁹⁰ While scientific criticism focused its attention on the artwork as an index of the artist's technique, and popular criticism addressed itself to the painting's "literary interest," Pater rigorously demarcates properly aesthetic experience from extra-aesthetic concerns about the technical and poetic meaning of artworks:

[A painting] must first of all delight the sense, delight it as directly and sensuously as a fragment of Venetian glass: and through this delight alone become the vehicle of whatever poetry or science may lie beyond [it] in the intention of the composer. In its primary aspect, a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor: is itself, in truth, a space of such fallen light, caught as the colours are in an Eastern carpet, but refined upon, and dealt with more subtly and exquisitely than by nature itself. (*The Renaissance*, 84-5)

An artwork is fundamentally a sensory object. Independent of meaning and interpretation, an aesthetic object in its most essential character comprises only, as Pater writes in the preface to *The Renaissance*, a receptacle of forces. Art "is thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material" (88).

Pater's characterization of aesthetic experience as "pure perception" invokes Romantic aesthetic theory as well as debates about cognition that were especially prominent in the late Victorian period. Most obviously, Pater's claim is an implicit appeal to Schopenhauer. It has become common critical knowledge that "The School of Giorgione" is indebted to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*. In particular, Pater's claim that all art aspires to the conditions of music has been clearly

⁹⁰ For a detailed reading of "The School of Giorgione" as a polemic aimed at these two schools of criticism, see Teukolsky 151-169.

recognized as indebted to Schopenhauer's argument that music alone among the arts is capable of embodying the Will directly, without the mediation of Ideas, because music is the one art which has no represented subject matter or content, the one art whose content is its form. By characterizing aesthetic experience as "pure perception," moreover, Pater alludes to Schopenhauer's definition of genius as "the capacity to maintain oneself in the state of pure perception, to lose oneself in perception, and to withdraw from the service of the will the knowledge which originally existed only for that service; that is to say, genius is the power of leaving one's own interests, wishes, and aims entirely out of sight, thus of entirely divesting oneself of one's own personality for a time so as to remain *pure knowing subject*, clear eye of the world" (109, emphasis in original). Pure perception transcends the routinized operations of consciousness, which instrumentally cognizes objects according to conventional usage. By tacitly invoking Schopenhauer's concept of pure perception, Pater thus provides support to his repeated insistence in "The School of Giorgione" that aesthetic experience is an end-in-itself. The essay's appeal to Schopenhauer's disinterested aesthetics is complicated, however, by the fact that late Victorian cognitive science was submitting the concept of pure perception to considerable scrutiny.

Schopenhauer's model of pure perception assumes that there is a human capacity, even if one only possessed by "genius," for a universal perception, a perception in which neither the contingent calibration of physical forces attending the perceptual act nor the perceiving subject's mental and neural history impinge on or distort the perception itself. As I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, the possibility of such a seamless fit between the mind and the world it perceives had been demolished by mid-century scientific studies of sense organs and the nervous system. These studies revealed complex, heretofore unimagined structures of mediation at work in even the simplest act of perception. Helmholtz's dissection of the retina, for

example, established that clear and detailed outlines and colors are only perceptible in the narrowly circumscribed area of the visual field registered in the fovea or center of the retina. The peripheral areas of the retina, Helmholtz demonstrated, are equipped with fewer photoreceptor cells, so that, while sensitive to movement, they provide only blurred, indefinitely colored impressions. As Jonathan Crary argues, Helmholtz's dissections of the retina overturned and swept away classical models of perspective: "After several centuries during which the visual field was conceived to be like a conal section of homogeneous clarity and range, the notion now developed that most of what we saw at any given moment hovered in an irreducible vagueness, in which a reading of space or distance was not possible. It was a major shift that led to a reformulation of how a subjective visual field came into being: not through an instantaneous intake of an image but through a complex aggregate of processes of eye movement that provisionally built up the appearance of a stable image" (Crary 290). Put another way, the physiological analysis of the retina made it clear that even simple visual perceptions are composite, built out of separate moments of focus that are synthesized in the act of perception itself.

Experimental psychology suggested, moreover, that consciousness plays a considerable role in gathering up fragmentary sensations into a perception, and that it does so partly by applying memories of past perceptions to present sensations. As Henri Bergson writes in *Matter and Memory*, "any memory-image that is capable of interpreting our actual perception inserts itself so thoroughly into it that we are no longer able to discern what is perception and what is memory." To illustrate this point, Bergson appeals to the example of the act of reading:

[In reading,] our mind notes here and there a few characteristic lines and fills all the intervals with memory-images which, projected on the paper, take the place of the real printed characters and may be mistaken for them. Thus we

are constantly creating or reconstructing. Our distinct perception is really comparable to a closed circle, in which the perception-image, going toward the mind, and the memory-image, launched into space, careen the one behind the other. (103)

As Bergson here suggests, it was neither empirically nor scientifically possible to untangle present sensations from the past perceptions through which the mind makes sense of them. Given this irreducibly composite character of perception, pure perception could only be a chimera. Experimental psychologists did make various attempts to isolate and define an elemental, pure perception, and to this end experimenters developed devices seeking to control and measure such small mental units, such as the tachistoscope in the early 1880s. Yet as Crary notes, the perceptual experience measured by the tachistoscope—which flashed symbols for less than a second to an observer from whom all other stimuli had been, as much as possible, blocked out—testified to how attenuated and impoverished such a pure perception must inevitably be were it even possible.⁹¹

A gulf thus intervenes between Schopenhauer's claims for a disinterested aesthetics of pure perception in 1819 and Pater's invocation of pure perception in "The School of Giorgione" in 1877. Even a passing glance at the notorious "Conclusion" is sufficient demonstration that Pater could not simply have been unaware of the epistemological problems and debates attending late Victorian scientific investigations of cognition. What, then, does Pater mean to suggest by pure perception? The aesthetic objects that address themselves to it, he writes, are "those in which the constituent elements of the composition are so welded together, that the material or subject no longer strikes the intellect only; nor the form, the eye or the ear only; but form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect to the 'imaginative

⁹¹ On pure perception and the tachistoscope, see Crary 304-6, 315-6.

reason,' that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol" (88). Pure perception is thus not independent of interpretation and meaning so much as it fuses interpreted meaning to signifying sensation, content to form. It is for this reason, Pater argues, that the most ideal art is music, the art in which "the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression; they inhere in and completely saturate each other; and to [music] therefore...all the arts may be supposed constantly to tend and aspire" (88). Music thus provides the type for Pater's pure perception. It does so, however, not by exemplifying a fictitiously simple and elemental mode of perception but by offering him a particular kind of model for perceptual synthesis, the dynamic organization and cognition of heterogeneous mental contents.

Pater locates this model of perceptual synthesis in music partly by drawing from late Victorian psycho-physiological studies of music. As critics have long recognized, Pater's remarks about music in "The School of Giorgione" seem to echo Schopenhauer's claims that music is the highest of the arts because it is the one thoroughly nonrepresentational art, the art whose content is its form. It was just this nonrepresentational character of music that, Helmholtz observed in 1857, initially deterred the scientific investigation of musical perception.⁹² After mid-century, however, scientific accounts of music became more common, especially following the appearance of Helmholtz's widely influential *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for a Theory of Music* in 1863. More importantly for Pater, these

⁹² Poetry, painting, and sculpture can "be critically investigated in respect to [their] correctness and truth to nature, [and] scientific art-criticism...has actually succeeded in making some progress in investigating the causes of that aesthetic pleasure which it is the intention of these arts to excite. In music, on the other hand, it seems at first sight as if those were still in the right who reject all 'anatomisation of pleasurable sensations.' This art...not attempting to describe, and only occasionally to imitate the outer world necessarily withdraws from scientific consideration the chief points of attack which other arts present, and hence seems to be as incomprehensible and wonderful as it certainly is powerful in its effects." See *Science and Culture*, 46.

studies put music into circulation as an important model for the work of consciousness in perception. Wundt, for example, derives his theory of apperception partly from his experiments with a metronome, which revealed an almost irresistible mental tendency to organize identical beats into rhythmical patterns.⁹³ Bergson uses just this perceptual tendency, in regard to the tolling of a bell, to illustrate his distinction between duration and number in *Time and Free Will*:

The sounds of the bell certainly reach me one after the other; but one of two alternatives must be true. Either I retain each of these successive sensations in order to combine it with the others and form a group which reminds me of an air or rhythm which I know: in that case I do not *count* the sounds, I limit myself to gathering, so to speak, the qualitative impression produced by the whole series. Or else I intend explicitly to count them, and then I shall have to separate them, and this separation must take place within some homogeneous medium in which the sounds, stripped of their qualities, and in a manner emptied, leave traces of their presence which are absolutely alike. (*Time and Free Will*, 86-7, emphasis in original)

As in the case of Wundt's metronome experiments, Bergson here suggests that the mind's more basic inclination is to synthesize the bell's tolls, to recognize them as heterogeneous while at the same time gathering them together into a provisional unity: an air or rhythm. In both cases, such musical forms elicit a mode of perception that organizes heterogeneous elements experienced successively. Put another way, the perception of music cognizes heterogeneous sensations in time.

As opposed to painting, sculpture, and architecture, musical form is temporal; both music and its apprehension unfold in time. Wundt and Bergson foreground this

⁹³ Significantly, Wundt begins his popular *Introduction to Psychology* by using his experiments with the metronome as an example of the most elemental aspects of apperception. He first detailed the results of these experiments in volume 2 of his 1874 *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie*.

temporal unfolding by appealing to melody and rhythm. But music is not simply composed of melody and rhythm—harmony is equally fundamental to musical form. Similarly, an act of perception does not just arrange different sensations that occur successively, but also different sensations occurring simultaneously. Both the successive and simultaneous dimensions of music's temporal form serve as crucial models for Pater's pure perception, as well as for Bergson's theory of duration.

As Helmholtz's studies of tone demonstrate, to experience music requires a complex perceptual economy of sensory and interpretive activity. Most fundamentally, the sensation of tone results from regular vibrations in the air—sound waves. Regular sound waves are transformed into musical tones by passing on their vibrations to the hair cells on a series of plates—which Helmholtz compares to the keys and strings of a piano—inside the cochlea. These vibrations are then transferred as neural currents to the brain. Unlike in the case of light, a scientific consensus that sound is made up of waves had been established long before the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Victorian scientists' detailed analysis of the ear strikingly revealed a hallucinatory landscape of teeming physical forces that lay beneath the apparently predictable world of our habitual perceptions. Helmholtz captures this effect by describing the soundscape of a ballroom:

You must conceive the air of a concert-hall or ballroom traversed in every direction...by a variegated crowd of intersecting wave-systems. From the mouths of the male singers proceed waves of six to twelve feet in length; from the lips of the songstresses dart shorter waves, of eighteen to thirty-six inches long. The rustling of silken skirts excites little curls in the air, each instrument in the orchestra emits its peculiar waves, and all these systems expand spherically from their respective centres, dart through each other, are reflected from the walls of the room, and thus rush backwards and forwards, until they

succumb to the greater force of newly generated tones. (*Science and Culture*, 57-8)

Despite this astonishing complexity, Helmholtz observes, the human ear simultaneously processes these overlapping wave-systems, orienting the mind among them. The wave-systems traversing the ballroom gain an additional complexity, moreover, in that each tone is made of compound waves—combinations of two or more simple waves. Simple waves, and thus simple tones, are in fact very rare, produced only by specially designed devices, such as tuning forks. One of Helmholtz's most important discoveries in *On the Sensations of Tone* was that simple notes played by musical instruments or sung by human voices are not simple tones. Musical instruments, vocal chords, and other resonant systems produce compound waves, waves composed of a fundamental tone combined with what Helmholtz called upper partials—vibrations at frequencies above that of the fundamental tone. The quality of a tone—whether it sounds like a violin or a trombone or a familiar voice—results from the distribution of these upper partials. Helmholtz argued, therefore, that all the tones of musical instruments are, strictly speaking, harmonic.

While auditors do not usually attend to each distinct tone present in a musical note, the ear analyzes the note nonetheless and, with effort, the mind can distinguish the separate tones. Thus, Helmholtz suggests, “the material ear of the body” analyzes compound tones into their components, while “the spiritual ear of the mind” puts these different components into relation as notes, chords, timbre, or, put another way, as music (64). Comparing the ear with the eye, Helmholtz throws into relief the harmonic capacities of hearing to simultaneously distinguish and synthesize sensory elements. The eye is unable to analyze compound waves of light, to break up mixed colors into their components. Thus, Helmholtz writes, “the eye has no sense of harmony in the same meaning as the ear. There is no music to the eye” (74). As we

shall see, this analysis of the complex harmonic capacities of the ear laid the groundwork for Pater's concept of pure perception and Bergson's theory of duration.

The Harmonics of Duration

Again and again in *Time and Free Will*, Bergson recurs to the example of music to theorize duration. As a succession of heterogeneous sensations that melt into and thoroughly permeate one another, duration is analogous to “the effect of a musical phrase which is constantly on the point of ending and constantly altered in its totality by the addition of some new note” (106). In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson does not specifically invoke harmony to illustrate duration; instead, he draws analogies with melody and rhythm. However, duration is not a succession of simple states, but a succession of sensory multiplicities. For Bergson, any given moment of duration is alive with multiple, simultaneous sensory experiences that overlap and bleed into one another even as they shift and succeed one another in time. While Bergson never mentions Helmholtz by name, his descriptions of duration evoke Helmholtz's account of the harmonic capacities of hearing, which likewise emphasize just that conjunction of successive and simultaneous heterogeneity within perception.⁹⁴ Indeed, Bergson obliquely cites Helmholtz's work on harmony in *Matter and Memory* to explain the dynamics of sense experience. A sense organ, Bergson writes, “is like an immense keyboard, on which the external object executes at once its harmony of a thousand notes” (128).

While Bergson draws from Helmholtz's account of harmony, he incurs this debt with the aim of challenging Helmholtz's theory of perception. For Helmholtz, as

⁹⁴ Although he rarely references him explicitly, Bergson certainly knew Helmholtz's work very well. Cary suggests that Helmholtz's theory of unconscious inference was one of Bergson's chief targets in *Matter and Memory* (Cary, 319-322).

for late Victorian cognitive science more broadly, sensory perception is fundamentally a semiotics. Immersed in a complex and fluctuating field of forces that it can only imperfectly register, the mind proceeds to convert stimuli into objects by making what Helmholtz calls “unconscious inferences.” From fragmentary sensory input, the mind unconsciously infers the presence of objects as their causes. In the act of perception, the mind thus reflexively interprets sensations as signs. As Crary notes, Bergson’s work suggests that he found Helmholtz’s theory of unconscious inferences, like the associationist theories to which it is closely related, repellent in its abridgement of autonomy and degrading resemblance to alienated, industrial labor.

Like Pater in *The Renaissance*, Bergson objected especially to the standardizing effects of language on consciousness and sensory experience, effects which associationist theories embraced for the sake of preserving a common sense and avoiding the collapse of all sensory experience into solipsism. Just as Pater argues that habit and language ossify and stereotype impressions, Bergson contends that the semiotics of perception desiccates and standardizes our experience of duration.

We instinctively tend to solidify our impressions in order to express them in language. Hence, we confuse the feeling itself, which is in a perpetual state of becoming, with its permanent external object, and especially with the word which expresses this object...Every sensation is altered by repetition, and...if it does not seem to me to change from day to day, it is because I perceive it through the object which is its cause, through the word which translates it.

This influence of language on sensation is deeper than is usually thought.

(*Time and Free Will*, 130-1).

Words segment and spatialize the experience of duration, crystallizing and dividing up its vital flux in the service of utility and communication. Language thus “constitutes the common element, the impersonal residue, of the impressions felt in a given case by

the whole of society” (133). For Bergson, language embodies a standardized common sense in whose terms duration is not even conceivable: “the idea of a multiplicity without relation to number or space, although clear for pure reflective thought, cannot be translated into the language of common sense” (122). The opposition Bergson thus establishes between duration and semiotics seals off duration from any common measure of experience, making duration a “kingdom within a kingdom” (139) and merging true experience with just the kind of solipsism that Pater’s aestheticism so often resembled.

In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson attempts to distinguish duration from solipsism, dreams, and hallucinations by appealing to neural habit theory.⁹⁵ One of the book’s central polemics is aimed at the scientific consensus that neural habits constitute the physical basis of memory.⁹⁶ To counter this argument, Bergson distinguishes between the memory that accrues as pathways in the nervous system—which he calls sensori-motor habits—and memory-images. Memory-images comprise our memories of particular experiences, of moments of duration. Bergson’s memory-images cannot be localized within the nervous system or in what Durkheim, making a similar argument, mockingly referred to as “a geography of the brain” (Durkheim, 12). Nevertheless, sensori-motor habits guide conscious attention to memory-images by providing the framework in which each act of perception must take place.

⁹⁵ Neural habits are absent from most of *Time and Free Will*, but they make an ominous appearance in that book’s conclusion where they facilitate a psychic split between conscious automatism and unconscious duration: “[Language] must not be thought to be a mode of symbolical representation only, for immediate intuition and discursive thought are one in concrete reality, and the very mechanism by which we only meant at first to explain our conduct will end by also controlling it. Our psychic states, separating then from each other, will get solidified; between our ideas, thus crystallized, and our external movements we shall witness permanent associations being formed; and little by little, as our consciousness thus imitates the process by which nervous matter procures reflex actions, automatism will cover over freedom” (237). One of the chief aims of *Matter and Memory* is to soften and ameliorate this stark division between consciousness and duration.

⁹⁶ William James, for example, claims that “the cause [of memory] is the law of habit in the nervous system, working as it does in ‘the association of ideas.’” See James 653-663.

By inscribing neural pathways in the body, sensori-motor habits shape the process that converts stimuli into sensations, laying the foundation for agency and free will. Bergson argues that these pathways always reflect the modes of our possible action on the forces surrounding us; we learn to sense those aspects of objects that appeal to actions relevant to our bodies' interests. He identifies the perceptions resulting from these interested sensori-motor habits as pure perception. In Bergson's pure perception, however, the limitations of our creaturely interests impoverish sensory experience. "Any unconscious material point" is rich compared to consciousness, Bergson writes, "since this point gathers and transmits the influences of all the points of the material universe, whereas our consciousness only attains to certain parts and to certain aspects of those parts...But there is, in this necessary poverty of our conscious perception, something that is positive, that foretells spirit: it is, in the etymological sense of the word, discernment" (38). As we shall see, this unconscious perceptual power of discernment bears a close resemblance to what Pater calls selection. Discernment makes agency possible by presenting to the mind a range of possible actions in relation to a sensory field, opening up what Bergson calls "a zone of indetermination." In this way, as Bergson claims in *Time and Free Will*, sensation "is nascent freedom" (34).

Sensori-motor habits present alternatives for consciousness to choose among, but consciousness makes this choice on the basis of memory-images that interpret sensations. For Bergson, pure perceptions—perceptions procured solely through sensori-motor habits—are not only impoverished but unreflective. As it habitually perceives objects, consciousness functions automatically, analyzing stimuli into discrete appeals to reflex action. In what Bergson calls complete or attentive perception, in contrast, consciousness resists these appeals to reflex action and synthesizes sensory stimuli by projecting memory-images onto present perceptions.

Memory thereby enriches pure perceptions, filling them out with prior experiences and making possible reflective choice among potential paths of action. Thus, “any memory-image that is capable of interpreting our actual perception inserts itself so thoroughly into it that we are no longer able to discern what is perception and what is memory” (103).

If memory “interprets” pure perceptions, however, then Bergson’s model of complete perception tacitly embraces the same semiotic theories of sensory perception that his work ostensibly critiques. Bergson admits as much when he writes that “in most cases...memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as ‘signs’ that recall to us former images” (33). Despite this cagey use of quotation marks around signs, the interpretation of pure perceptions through memory-images shares very similar dynamics with late Victorian associationism and other semiotic models of sensory perception, including, I argue, those developed by Pater. As in, for example, William James’ account of association, memory’s interpretations of sense data take place along a continuum stretching from the most conventional and unreflective habitual perceptions to the most polysemic, dissociative leaps of consciousness, leaps analogous for both writers to dreams, hallucinations, and madness. *Matter and Memory* exhibits an acute awareness that the forms of enriched perception that Bergson valorized bore an uncomfortable resemblance to reverie and trance. For example, Bergson makes the well-nigh Wildean claim that in order to possess the capacity for complete perception, “we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream” (83). While such prescriptions may seem like conventional pleas for disinterested aesthetic experience, they are belied elsewhere in *Matter and Memory* by the arguments that a fully disinterested sensory experience is impossible and the considerably anxious efforts Bergson makes

to sharply distinguish enriched perception from dreams and other dissociative, trance-like modes of consciousness. As I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, this specific constellation of arguments and anxieties characterizes much of the late Victorian writing on cognitive science and the semiotics of sensory perception, not least by Pater himself.

As in much of this writing, *Matter and Memory* employs sensori-motor habits and the bodily needs they reflect to restrain the dangerous tendency of perceptual interpretation to elicit unruly, solipsistic states of consciousness. Bergson ensures that the perceiving mind does not take such unruly flights by reworking associationism's most beloved metaphor for the movement of consciousness: the train of thought. Perception, Bergson writes, "is supposed to be a rectilinear progress, by which the mind goes further and further from the object, never to return to it. We maintain, on the contrary, that reflective perception is a *circuit*" (104, emphasis his). Within this circuit, the pure perception provided by our sensori-motor habits and the memory-images projected onto it by our mind revolve, each altering and refining the other. The circuit of perception thus tethers to a given pure perception the memory-images that interpret it, securing what Bergson calls "attention to life" (14). When optimally functioning, the balance thus established separates the "man of action" and "good sense" from the unreflective "man of impulse," on one side, and the ineffective dreamer, on the other (153).⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Crary argues that Bergson's defensive move to bind memory and duration to such norms of attentive activity reflects his "great fear" of losing the capacity for perceptual agency, for cognitive acts of will that Bergson saw as the only possible remedy to the alienation and reification of capitalist modernity (Crary 323-8). Equally, however, Bergson's circuit of perception reflects an anxiety to preserve communicative norms. The sensori-motor habits to which our perceptions are bound also, implicitly, embody an "impersonal" common sense; in the act of interpreting another's speech, for example, these habits shape and provide "the empty vessel, which determines, by its form, the form which the fluid mass [of interpreting memory-images], rushing into it, already tends to take" (121).

In conceptualizing this circuit of perception, Bergson again draws analogies to music. Capable of both extreme dilation and extreme contraction, the circuit of perception narrows down into something resembling reflex-action at one end and, at the other, expands to accommodate multiple memory-images—enabling consciousness “to grasp in a single intuition multiple moments of duration” (228). In the latter case, the link between duration and sensori-motor habits facilitates the acting out of duration. “The role of the body,” Bergson later wrote in *The Creative Mind*, “was thus to reproduce in action the life of the mind, to emphasize its motor articulations as the orchestra conductor does for a musical score; the brain did not have thinking as its function but that of hindering the thought from being lost in dream” (*The Creative Mind*, 87). The body, here and in *Matter and Memory*, is a neural nexus, set to vibrating both by external forces and by memory-images themselves within the circuit of perception. In this regard, memory-images constitute a counterpart to the keyboard formed by our sense organs; they are, as Bergson evocatively calls them, “a mental ear” (129). Complete perception, he thus suggests, is itself a “harmony of a thousand notes,” played on the keyboards of mind and body at once.

Between Fact and Value: Pure Perception and Pater’s Imaginative Sense of Fact

Pater’s work, too, elaborates a theory of a certain kind of perception as harmonic. In “The School of Giorgione,” Pater follows his claim that all arts aspire to the conditions of music with a description of one existing picture believed at the time to have been painted by Giorgione: *The Concert in the Pitti Palace*. The subject of this painting is a musical performance, or, rather, as Pater describes it, the subject is the moment just preceding the performance, when the three musicians are finding the tonic, the harmonic center of the piece they are about to play.

The *Concert* in the *Pitti Palace* (sic), in which a monk, with cowl and tonsure, touches the keys of a harpsichord, while a clerk, placed behind him, grasps the handle of a viol, and a third, with cap and plume, seems to wait upon the true interval for beginning to sing, is undoubtedly Giorgione's. The outline of the lifted finger, the trace of the plume, the very threads of the fine linen, which fasten themselves on the memory, in the moment before they are lost altogether in that calm unearthly glow, the skill which has caught the waves of wandering sound, and fixed them for ever on the lips and hands—these are indeed the master's own. (*The Renaissance*, 92)

Pater's description of this painting subtly invokes a perceptual movement from analysis to synthesis. In contemplating the painting, the aesthete's keen eye seizes upon even "the very threads" of the musician's clothes, threads fastened and preserved in memory even while they disappear into the calm unearthly glow of the painting's complete aesthetic effect. The aesthete thus mirrors the artist, who likewise synthesizes the life of Venice, with "all the motives, all the interests and effects of a long history," into "ideal instants...exquisite pauses in time...which are like some consummate extract or quintessence of life" (95-6). Just as the aesthete synthesizes his impressions of the individual threads into a complete aesthetic effect, Giorgione captures and condenses "waves of wandering sound" into the dramatic gestures represented in the painting.

The aesthete's capacity to grasp such fine details and then retain this hold even as he subsumes those details in a complete aesthetic impression contrasts starkly with the scientific art criticism criticized in Pater's essay. For, the practitioners of the new scientific criticism, the painting exists only as fine details. Adept at analyzing aesthetic objects, they fail to synthesize those details into a complete aesthetic impression. Similarly, Crowe and Cavalcaselle, the two critics whose efforts to

authenticate paintings attributed to Giorgione dramatically reduced the number of paintings thought to have been painted by him, analyzed Giorgione's reputation without recognizing its complete aesthetic worth. They see only the threads, not the glow. "In the 'new Vasari,'" Pater tartly writes, Giorgione's "great traditional reputation, woven with so profuse demand on men's admiration, has been scrutinized thread by thread; and what remains of the most vivid and stimulating of Venetian masters, a live flame, as it seemed, in those old shadowy times, has been reduced almost to a name by his most recent critics" (91).

If Crowe and Cavalcaselle's scientific criticism reduced Giorgione to a name, however, Pater suggests that it is as a name that Giorgione possesses much of his aesthetic value. While the "new Vasari" successfully refuted much of the traditional knowledge regarding Giorgione, Pater faults such a one-sided critical project for its inability to recognize that "in what is connected with a great name, much that is not real is often very stimulating" (94). More than just stimulating, Pater exalts these factually inaccurate traditions into what he calls "the *vraie vérité*...those more liberal and durable impressions which, in respect of any really considerable person or subject, anything that has at all intricately occupied men's attention, lie beyond, and must supplement, the narrower range of the strictly ascertained facts about it" (98). In the case of Giorgione, this *vraie vérité* consists of the painter's influence, his "school": his effects on his contemporaries, on other painters, and on traditions of artistic representation, "traditions of subject and treatment, which really descend from him to our own time, and by retracing which we fill out the original image." By following the conventions of representation that comprise Giorgione's influence, we can reconstruct him and his lost paintings. Moreover, just as Giorgione and his paintings can be re-imagined through the subsequent paintings that in effect represent them, Giorgione and his paintings are in their turn representations, insofar as Giorgione,

through the conventions of subject and treatment that he bequeaths, “becomes a sort of impersonation of Venice itself, its projected reflex or ideal, all that was intense or desirable in it crystallizing about the memory of this wonderful young man” (94). Giorgione, by thus establishing a “school,” both elaborates and becomes a part of what Pater in “The Child in the House” calls “a system of visible symbolism.” In doing so, however, Pater’s Giorgione seems to contradict Pater’s claims that true pictorial art eschews signification and interpretation.

“The School of Giorgione” thus arrives very quickly at one of the fundamental tensions at work in Pater’s aestheticism: that between object and sign. As we have seen, Pater criticizes the encroachment of language and interpretation on aesthetic experience in *The Renaissance* and “The School of Giorgione,” citing its capacity to standardize and constrain sensory impressions. Hence “The School of Giorgione” famously urges that “painting must be before all things decorative, a thing for the eye, a space of color on the wall, only more dexterously blent than the marking of its precious stone or the chance interchange of sun and shade upon it:—this to begin and end with; whatever higher matter of thought, or poetry, or religious reverie might play its part therein, between” (89). Yet Pater’s own virtuoso poetic descriptions of artworks—his notoriously “poetic” reading of *The Mona Lisa*, for example—entirely disregard and violate this prescription. This contradiction takes several forms in Pater’s work. As James Eli Adams argues, it plays out partly as a tension between surface—the sensuous presence and integrity of the aesthetic object—and depth—the hidden recesses of meaning gestured at but not fully embodied by the aesthetic object, an announced but undisclosed psychic interiority particularly important to Pater as a form of masculine social presentation (*Dandies and Desert Saints*, 199-201). In “The School of Giorgione,” it also plays out as a tension between fact and value, in which scientific art criticism’s narrow focus on establishing facts must be supplemented by

an appreciation of aesthetic value in order to arrive at the *vraie vérité*, but the discovery of that value entails just that “literary interest” in aesthetic objects as representations that Pater criticizes in popular criticism (84). Subtending both these contradictions is the epistemological tension between object and sign. As Pater recognized, to regard an aesthetic object as a sign would be both to standardize it—to solidify it and put it into public circulation—and to undermine its claims to exist as an end-in-itself—to make its value conditional on its social meanings. Yet to regard an artwork purely as an object would be to render it similarly inert, a simple fact with no special claim to our interest or appreciation. The faith in such a purely disinterested and unmediated relation with sensory objects had in any case been conclusively refuted by late Victorian cognitive science, as Pater was very well aware, and as he acknowledges in his well-known pronouncement in “Coleridge” that “to the modern spirit nothing is or can be rightly known except relatively and under conditions” (*Appreciations*, 65).

To resolve this dilemma, Pater develops his concept of the imaginative reason, the faculty of pure perception. Art, he writes in “The School of Giorgione,” “addresses not pure sense, still less the pure intellect, but the imaginative reason *through the senses*” (83, my emphasis). Thus, if paintings must be a thing for the eye, the sensuous delight they provide is nonetheless a “vehicle,” a means of reaching the imaginative reason (84). However, an artwork’s sensuous qualities are also more than just a means, because vehicle and tenor are inseparable for the imaginative reason, “that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol” (88). The imaginative reason thus preserves the sensory qualities of art as its “primary aspect,” while simultaneously enabling the aesthete to find a meaning in those sensory qualities that endows the artwork with a value over and above its mere physical existence, its status as fact. The imaginative reason thus

charts a perfect middle course between the purely literary interests of popular art criticism and the ostensibly value-neutral, fact-oriented focus of scientific art criticism. One might say that it makes possible what Pater elsewhere calls “the imaginative sense of fact.”

Pater elaborates on the perceptual dynamics and ethical implications of imaginative reason in “The Child in the House,” published the year following the appearance of “The School of Giorgione.” The account of Florian’s brain-building is, fundamentally, an account of the emergence of his faculty of imaginative reason. It is clearly this faculty that Florian develops as his childhood sensory experiences interweave “a system of visible symbolism...through all [his] thoughts and passions” (“The Child in the House,” 6). When Florian later encounters philosophy, he affirms the importance of his imaginative reason, observing that the “sensible vehicle or occasion [of any abstract thoughts] became...the necessary concomitant of any perception of things, real enough to be of any weight or reckoning in his house of thought” (11). Pater suggests, moreover, that Florian’s imaginative reason enables an ethical relation to others. “There were times,” Florian reflects, “when he could think of the necessity he was under of associating all thoughts to touch and sight, as a sympathetic link between himself and actual, feeling, living objects” (11). Florian’s quickness to realize the sensible vehicles of any idea makes him more alive to the pain of others, as when he recognizes that by taking a bird away from her nestlings, he had “become an accomplice in moving, to the limit of his small power, the springs and handles of that great machine in things, constructed so ingeniously to play pain-fugues on the delicate nerve-work of living creatures” (10). Additionally, however, Florian’s imaginative reason enables an ethical relation to others by inculcating in him the neural habits that make up a *sensus communis*.

“The Child in the House” turns to neural habits both to explain the physical basis of the imaginative reason and to make ethics possible within Pater’s aestheticism. The story clearly draws from late Victorian associationist arguments that neural pathways carved out by repeated sensory experiences gradually built up a semiotics of perception, in which any given sensation acts as a sign for its associates. Pater employs much of the language and rhetoric of late Victorian associationism as he describes the effects of his surroundings on Florian as his mother, aptly enough, teaches him to read:

How insignificant, at the moment, seem the influences of the sensible things which are tossed and fall and lie about us, so or so, in the environment of early childhood. How indelibly, as we afterward discover, they affect us; with what capricious attractions and associations they figure themselves on the white paper, the smooth wax of our ingenuous souls, as ‘with lead in the rock forever,’ giving form and feature, and as it were assigned house-room in our memory to early experiences of feeling and thought, which abide with us ever afterwards, thus, and not otherwise. (6)⁹⁸

Inscribing associations in the mind, neural habits here develop Florian’s imaginative reason by giving form to thoughts and feelings, joining them to particular sensory

⁹⁸ Interestingly, Pater here employs the figure of the *tabula rasa*, suggesting that Florian begins life with no inherited neural habits. Since inheritability was a crucial feature of neural habits in late Victorian physiology, most writers from this period figured the mind as a palimpsest instead. Inherited perceptual habits were, however, very important for Pater, and he elsewhere suggests that consciousness is a palimpsest. Most often, he does so indirectly, through an emphasis on the importance to aesthetic experience of striving to “clear” the mind of perceptual habits, to *make* the mind a *tabula rasa*, but he employs the figure directly in *Plato and Platonism*. There, Pater refers to “ancient, half-obliterated inscriptions on the mental walls, the mental tablet” that could be revived in us under the right circumstances (Paterian anamnesis draws heavily from the theory of neural inheritance). See *Plato and Platonism*, 66. Douglas Mao argues that Pater revises the language of neural habits, replacing the figure of inscription, which implies the uni-directional action of stimuli on a consistently passive mind, with the figure of “one inextricable texture” composed of both consciousness and the material world (Mao, 71). While Pater certainly does complicate the relation of mind to world in the associationist model, it must nonetheless be acknowledged that such revisions exist alongside many moments when Pater employs a more conventional associationist rhetoric.

analogues that will “interpret” his later experiences (8). As Florian yields himself to his surroundings “to be played upon by them like a musical instrument,” he acquires habits of perception that tune his consciousness to his childhood home. As Douglas Mao has compellingly argued, Pater’s story encapsulates many of the themes and ideas informing the late Victorian fascination with aesthetic environments and their power to shape juvenile growth (Mao, 66-81). But Florian’s home is not just any aesthetic environment; it is also “typically” English. In the story’s most extensive instance of narrative intrusion, the narrator explains the especially “home-like” character of Florian’s home by appealing to its especial Englishness.

As, after many wanderings, I have come to fancy that some parts of Surrey and Kent are, for Englishmen, the true landscape, true home-counties...so, I think that the sort of house I have described, with precisely those proportions of red-brick and green, and with a just perceptible monotony in the subdued order of it, for its distinguishing note, is, for Englishmen at least, typically home-like. And so for Florian [the sense of home] was reinforced by this special home-likeness...[and] the sense of harmony between his soul and its physical environment became, for a time at least, like perfectly played music. (7)

This typically English house determines the ethical character of Florian’s habits. If Florian’s habitation shapes his cognitive and perceptual habits, if his material house builds up his house of thought, then the especial Englishness of that house ensures his participation in an English common sense. Pater’s moral defense of Florian’s aesthetic sensibilities—on the grounds that they quicken his capacity for sympathy—tacitly appeals to just such a common sense, insofar as late Victorian ethics of sympathy, such as that promulgated by George Eliot, rest on the feeling in common made possible by neural habits. Pater later uses the concept of sympathy to denote

just this sharing of common sense in *Marius the Epicurean*.⁹⁹ In the passage above, moreover, Pater uses the same trope that he will employ to figure the ethics of common sense in *Marius*: harmony.

In “The Child in the House,” this trope governs not only Florian’s relationship with his typically English home, but also the form of enriched perception that Florian develops through religious observance. Adapting religious symbolism to his daily life, Florian enriches his perception of his surroundings by “habitually” recognizing alongside of each object its “celestial correspondent.” By religiously interpreting his home, by making all the objects in it “weighty with meanings,” Florian sacralizes the common usages and objects making up his domestic life (16). Florian conceives of religion as “a transcendent version or representation, under intenser and more expressive light and shade, of human life and its familiar or exceptional incidents...a complimentary strain or burden, applied to our every-day existence, whereby the stray snatches of music in it re-set themselves, and fall into the scheme of some higher and more consistent harmony” (15). Religion, here, teaches Florian an interpretive mode of perception that functions by harmonizing a given sensory experience with intensified, idealized representations of it. When Florian “applies” religion to his daily life, he self-consciously engages in a “constant substitution of the typical for the actual” (16). Yet Florian, steeped in the imaginative reason and always ascribing more importance to thought’s sensible vehicle than to thought itself, does not simply replace the actual with the typical. Rather, he makes these substitutions primarily to fill out the actual, to enhance its value by making it “weighty with meanings.” Thus, Florian neither dissolves the actual in the typical nor collapses the distinction between the two—instead, he experiences them harmonically, at once unified and distinct in

⁹⁹ See, for one example, *Marius the Epicurean* 261.

effect.¹⁰⁰ In this respect, harmony, for Pater, instantiates a mode of perception that accommodates habit—and thereby, as we shall see, common sense—without generating “a stereotyped world.” Florian’s harmonic perception may be defined by “the habitual recognition, beside every circumstance and event of life, of its celestial correspondent,” but, insofar as his perception is harmonic, this habitual recognition will not become equivalent to “the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations seem alike” (*The Renaissance*, 153).

Harmonic perception also makes possible the form of aesthetic agency that Pater designates “choice” or “selection.” The power of aesthetic distinction implied by “choice” played an important role in Paterian aestheticism, which exhorted aesthetes to achieve a “quickenened, multiplied consciousness” by constantly discriminating and seeking out the most “choice” aspects of experience, the “focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy” (152-3). One of Marius’ first and most enduring commitments, for example, is to “discriminate, ever more and more exactly, select form and color in things from what [is] less select” (*Marius the Epicurean*, 38). Like harmony, then, selection entails the reflective focalization of sensory experience, a voluntary coordination and arrangement of experiential contents in which consciousness intensifies some sensations—the select—and attenuates others—the less select. In this respect, selection lays the epistemological groundwork for the figurative strategy, deftly analyzed by Williams,

¹⁰⁰ Pater indirectly underscores the importance of harmonic perception through his turn to typology as a figurative strategy and formal method in “The Child in the House” and in *Marius*. Typology, Carolyn Williams writes in her study of Pater, does not consist of the simple substitution of terms; rather, typology “must be grounded in historical actuality, must preserve the integrity of separate historical events, and must not allow the linear, ‘horizontal’ dimension of history to disappear in allegorical, ‘vertical,’ spiritualizing or symbolic substitutions.” Put another way, typology entails the coordination of a multiplicity of events, experiences, and meanings both in and across time. The typological representation of any given event must simultaneously preserve that event’s concreteness and join it with other events—either preceding it or anticipated by it—that interpret it. Typology, in this respect, is harmonic. See Williams, 209.

that Pater calls “relief.” Relief masters a complex sensory or cognitive field by raising and defining a figure against a background of which the figure is a part (Williams, 153-8). Relief thus employs a form of perceptual selection, and Pater suggests that all artistic representations rely on this principle. “The basis of all artistic genius,” he writes in “Winckelmann,” “lies in the power...of putting a happy world of its own creation in place of the meaner world of our common days, generating around itself an atmosphere with a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits, according to the choice of the imaginative intellect” (R 137). Pater identifies selection here as the function of “the imaginative intellect,” a faculty that anticipates the imaginative reason in “The School of Giorgione” as well as Pater’s claim in “Style” that fine art attempts to represent not fact but the artist’s “imaginative sense of fact” (*Appreciations*, 4). The imaginative intellect’s choices, here, effect a transubstantiation—changing the meaner world of our common days into a happier one of its creation—in a manner that is strikingly similar to that of Florian’s religious observances. Both artistic representations and religious symbolism enrich our perception by reorienting and re-focalizing sensory experience. In that respect, both provide us with an imaginative sense of fact, in which “sense” denotes sensory experience as well as understanding. To the degree that they do so, however, the “select” in our perception is not of our own selecting.

Perceptual selection constitutes the fundamental mechanism of perhaps the most enduring theoretical concern of Pater’s work: influence. While selection and choice imply the participation of the aesthete’s reflective agency in any act of perception, in fact the aesthete’s “choice” is often guided, if not determined, by the selections made by others. Florian’s religious observances and the artworks mentioned in “Winckelmann” provide two paradigmatic instances of this kind of perceptual influence. Cultural customs bequeath to Florian the celestial

correspondents that orient his perceptions. Florian's religious observances thus ensure his participation in a set of cultural traditions, a common sense of the world and its significance. These traditions, diffuse in origin and effect, contrast with artworks, which, while they may depend and draw on cultural traditions in both their production and reception, are also individual products of an individual consciousness. To that extent, being influenced by particular artworks became tantamount to being "under the influence" of another person, to becoming vulnerable to that person's control.

The influence of artworks thus became charged with especially acute anxieties over lost or compromised autonomy in Pater's writings as well as in late Victorian culture more broadly. Music, in particular, seemed to many late Victorians the artistic medium most conducive to the diffusion of dangerous forms of influence. The protagonist of Tolstoy's 1889 novella, *Kreutzer sonata*, for example, claims that music possesses an almost boundless capacity for influence and therefore ought to be regulated by the state.

Music, at once, immediately transfers me into the spiritual state in which he who wrote the music found himself. My soul melts into his, and together with him I am transferred from one state to another, but for what reason I do this, I do not know. You know he, who wrote the Kreutzer Sonata, Beethoven, he knew why he found himself in such a state...That state had meaning for him, but for me there was nothing of the sort. (Tolstoy, 193).

The capacity of music to affect us "at once, immediately" hints at an important reason that music seemed the art form above all others that crystallized the dangers of artistic influence. Ostensibly nonrepresentational, the dynamics of music's influence were therefore all the more inscrutable, and its effects therefore all the more insidious. In addition, music's movement, its temporal form, suggested parallels with the methods used to induce hypnosis, which had become the object of renewed scientific and

popular fascination from the 1870s until the turn of the century (See Crary 65-71, 230-6). George Du Maurier's immensely popular 1894 novel, *Trilby*, for example, represents these seemingly hypnotic properties of music in sometimes lurid detail.¹⁰¹

These widespread anxieties and fascinations with artistic influence were both shared and stimulated by late Victorian science, especially by theories of nervous reflexes and the cognitive mechanisms of interpretation (See, for example, Wallen). As I have argued in detail in chapter 3, late Victorian psycho-physiologists held that the interpretation of any expression of another consciousness included the ideo-motor reenactment of the feelings and ideas expressed by that consciousness. Bergson, for example, claims in *Matter and Memory* that "to follow an arithmetical addition is to do it over again for ourselves. To understand another's words is, in like manner, to reconstruct intelligently, starting from the ideas, the continuity of sound which the ear perceives" (*Matter and Memory*, 116-7). Bergson refers to this intelligent reconstruction as "the motor-diagram" of heard speech. While Bergson's intelligent reconstruction implies conscious, willed mental effort, other writers characterized such ideo-motor mechanisms of interpretation as involuntary and unconscious. Their potentially automatic, unreflective character led Gabriel Tarde to claim that society simply is unconscious imitation, and made possible Dilthey's faith in the capacity of genius to manage the emerging vulgarization of art by discreetly providing the masses with a proper aesthetic education. Theories of ideo-motor re-enactment thus invested art with the power to quietly shape the consciousnesses of those who came in contact with it, for good or ill.

Pater, too, invokes the physiology of interpretation in his representations of art's capacity for influence. As Adams cannily notes, Pater insistently employs

¹⁰¹ *Trilby* likewise explicitly remarks on the absolute independence of music's hypnotic power from the representational content of song lyrics. See, especially, Du Maurier 44, 213.

strategies of representation that blur “distinctions between aesthetic representation and social presentation; aesthetic understanding comes to be understood on the model of intimate knowledge of another person” (*Dandies and Desert Saints* 185). Both forms of knowledge require at least a degree of ideo-motor re-enactment, since, for Pater, art and artistic personalities re-orient the aesthete’s sensory experience according to their own perceptual selections. As Marius discovers in reading *The Phaedrus*, art and artistic persons possess the power of “conforming the seer to themselves as with some cunning physical necessity” (*Marius the Epicurean* 38). Consequently, artists enjoyed a charismatic social authority, with whose forms and rhetoric Pater was certainly adept. At the same time, this power of influence potentially compromised agency in aesthetic experience, rendering the aesthete an unconscious automaton. One of the most important critical tasks for Paterian aestheticism was therefore, as Wallen argues, to reconcile the aesthete’s capacity to be aesthetically influenced with his ability to reflectively analyze his aesthetic experiences (Wallen 86). This task is further complicated, however, by the fluidity between individual and cultural influence.

For Pater, moments of individual influence cascade and ramify themselves into traditions and forms of cultural influence. In Pater’s work, Adams observes, “as the critic—and more generally, any receptive beholder—responds to aesthetic ‘powers or forces,’ that response in turn takes its place in a relay of influence, within which each new testament to the vital power of the artwork becomes itself an aesthetic stimulus, which confirms, extends, and diffuses the powers of the original object. Aesthetic meaning and significance are thus always unfolding through varied forms of influence, influence registered not only in individual lives but across generations and centuries, in the shaping of schools, tradition, cultures.”¹⁰² Thus Giorgione’s “school”—the

¹⁰² See “Transparencies of Desire: An Introduction,” 2. As I argue below, the problem of individual influence in Pater’s writings cannot be fully understood without attention to the problem of cultural influence.

traditions of representation and perception initiated by his influence—constitutes a *vraie vérité* independent of his actual surviving paintings. As such influences diffuse themselves into traditions, they become the basis for the aesthetic, perceptual, and ethical habits that make shared cultural values possible.

Pater's representations of influence thus impinge in two ways on the question of ethics for Paterian aestheticism. As is hardly surprising for a writer so notoriously accused of leading impressionable youths astray, Pater's work betrays a keen interest in the ethics of having an influence on another person. Most recently, this aspect of Pater's work has been taken up in queer studies focusing on the importance of seduction and the erotics of pedagogy to Paterian aestheticism.¹⁰³ But running alongside Pater's attention to the ethics of *having* an influence is a corresponding attention to the ethics of *being* influenced. If being influenced enables one to participate in a common life of shared values, then being influenced amounts to an ethical imperative no less binding than the norms that would govern one's having an influence on others. The ethics of being influenced make up perhaps the central focus of *Marius the Epicurean*, the 1885 novel in which Pater attempts to answer the charges that the aesthetic program outlined in *The Renaissance* amounted to little more than the amoral solipsism of "high-toned corruption" (Donoghue, 48).

Marius and the Ethics of Influence

Marius the Epicurean opens with its protagonist having reached the same stage of development that Florian has reached when "The Child in the House" closes. Like Florian at the end of "The Child in the House," Marius has acceded to a set of religious usages and symbols, in his case those belonging to the traditional Roman religion of the Lares, the household gods. These symbols and usages have likewise

¹⁰³ For two recent examples, see Kaiser and Bailey.

grown out of provincial Roman domestic life, sacralizing its mundane acts and objects by endowing them with “poetic and...moral significance” (18). By teaching Marius to perceive the incidents and objects of daily life with reference to their customary spiritual meanings—their traditional “celestial correspondents,” as it were—the religion of the Lares inculcates in him the “habit” of feeling a “responsibility towards the world of men and things...a claim for due sentiment concerning them” (24). In other words, the religion of the Lares cultivates in Marius the feeling of ethical responsibility, or conscience. However, just as Florian must ultimately leave his home, Marius soon outgrows the narrow constraints of the life and religion of rural Roman domesticity. He soon begins to wonder whether the “religion of the villa might come to count with him as but one form of poetic beauty, or of the ideal, in things; as but one voice, in a world where there were many voices it would be a moral weakness not to listen to” (49). His departure from home to finish his schooling in Pisa intensifies these doubts, breeding in him a “boundless appetite for experience, for adventure,” in defiance of “the old, staid, conservative religion of his childhood” (52-3).

Pater frames the conflict between Marius’ religious reverence and his hunger for experience partly through the *bildungsroman*’s conventional opposition of tradition and modernity. While studying in Pisa, Marius shrinks from the “imaginative exaltation of the past” urged on him by the old religion, and cautiously asserts the superiority and freedom of the present, “ready to boast in its very modernness” (52). Having left home, Marius makes the conventional claim to the negative liberty of modernity, to the “entire liberty of heart and brain” untrammelled by the traditional past and its demands on the present and thereby promising him “unlimited self-expansion in a world of various sunshine” (53, 49). Although Marius ultimately pursues this promise by moving to Rome—fulfilling the *bildungsroman*’s generic

convention of moving from the provinces to try one's fortune in the capital—the liberty of experience he seeks does not lie in mere freedom of social or geographical mobility. The freedom of experience Marius desires is in fact more fundamental, more literal, than the liberty to travel or advance in the social hierarchy. For Marius, the negative liberty of experience denotes instead the freedom of a sensory experience unfettered by traditional norms of perception.

In striving to free himself from norms of perception, Marius rehearses the epistemological shift that, according to Pater, characterizes the advent of modernity. In distinction from ancient thought, Pater famously writes in his 1866 essay “Coleridge,” modern thought is relative. While ancient thought attempts to define and fix its objects permanently, modern thought self-reflexively focuses on the relative conditions that attend the act of knowing. Under modernity, therefore, “it is the truth of these relations that experience gives us, not the truth of eternal outlines ascertained once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change—and bids us, by a constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis, to make what we can of these” (*Appreciations* 67). To arrive at the truth of relations, Pater suggests, one must strive to move beyond—in order to attain a vantage point on—any partial viewpoint or particular set of conditions. Marius's attempts to experience modernity are thus defined by “his efforts towards a complete, many-sided existence” (246). But these efforts play out at the level of aesthetic experience; in order to move beyond the limits of any one-sided perspective, Marius must strive to clear constantly the organs of observation. It is to aid him in these efforts that Marius turns to the epistemological skepticism of Epicureanism. Marius embraces Epicureanism in order “to clear the tablet of the mind from suppositions no more than half realisable, or wholly visionary, leaving it in flawless evenness of surface to the impressions of an experience, concrete

and direct” (142). Pater observes that the value of Epicureanism, in both Marius’ time and in the late nineteenth century lies in just these strivings “to be absolutely virgin towards such experience, by ridding ourselves of such abstractions as are but the ghosts of bygone impressions” (142). In this way, Pater tacitly signals that Marius’ Epicureanism stands in for his own aestheticist iteration of it in *The Renaissance*.

Marius’ turn to Epicureanism thus rehearses many of the arguments in Pater’s “Conclusion,” most especially his argument against habit. Epicureanism’s attempts to “clear the tablet of the mind,” to erase from it “the ghosts of bygone impressions” and make it a tabula rasa, invoke neural science’s figure of consciousness as a palimpsest written over by neural habits. When Marius encounters the philosophy of Heraclitus as a forebear of Epicureanism, he notes that Heraclitus too suggests that the proper reception of his ideas “must involve a denial of habitual impressions, as the necessary first step in the way of truth” (130). Like Pater in “The Conclusion,” Marius’ Heraclitus contends that these habits constrain and distort sensory experience, covering over the teeming sensory world with a veil of routinized perceptual norms that disclose only sameness and immobility where in fact there is infinite difference and perpetual alteration. Further, just as Pater’s arguments against habit implied an attack on the foundation of Victorian ethics in common sense, so Marius’ Epicureanism seems to define itself against a debased world of “common experience.” Heraclitus suggests that his philosophy cannot be understood by “the many,” scorning their “careless, half-conscious, ‘use-and-wont’ reception of...experience” and the “common opinion” that finds only “fixed objects” instead of the ceaseless play of vital forces (130-2). Having moved beyond the habits of the old Roman religion, Marius finds himself becoming aware of a “large dissidence between an inward and somewhat exclusive world of vivid personal apprehension, and the unimproved, unheightened reality of the life of those about him...To move afterwards in that outer world of other

people, as though taking it at their estimate, would be possible henceforth only as a kind of irony” (134). Marius even applies this ironic skepticism to the very concept of “common experience” itself, which, echoing Pater’s claim in the “Conclusion” that language creates the apparent solidity of objects, he dismisses as “only a fixity of language” (139). Through Epicurean skepticism, Marius asserts an empowering negative liberty of perception that, by virtue of the distance it opens up between his own conscious life and that of those about him, functions both as a defense against hostile social scrutiny and, as Adams argues, a form of social presentation that entices fascination in order to establish his worth (*Dandies and Desert Saints* 190). Nevertheless, his Epicurean efforts to clear his mind from perceptual habits and norms seem to substantiate the charges of amoral solipsism that Pater sought to refute in *Marius*.

Marius’ negative liberty of perception endangers not only his moral sense but also his capacity for aesthetic experience. Adams notes the conflict in the novel between two orders of experience: “one that embraces a specific aesthetic or criteria of evaluation...another that upholds what is in effect an ideal of the innocent eye” (*Dandies and Desert Saints* 213). The innocent eye, the absolute virginity of experience striven for by Epicureanism, presents a problem for Paterian aestheticism insofar as its principled rejection of all perceptual habits seems to make any perceptual organization of stimuli impossible. The Epicureans’ refusal to give any “reasonable ‘assent’” to the norms and habits that define traditional religion and ethics renders their sensory experience flat and indiscriminate. “The spectacle of their fierce, exclusive, tenacious hold on their own narrow apprehension,” the narrator remarks, “makes one think of a picture with no relief” (264). The dilemma presented by the Epicureans’ perceptual iconoclasm thus rehearses the conflict—between surface and depth, fact and value, object and sign—animating “The School of Giorgione.” In their

rigorous efforts to exclude social values from sensory perception, the Epicureans parody the scientific art critics whose exclusive focus on facts renders them incapable of appreciating the *vraie vérité* of aesthetic impressions. Above all, as Pater's analogy of the picture without relief suggests, the Epicurean ideal of the innocent eye destroys the capacity to exercise the aesthetic agency of relief and selection, on which the possibility of artistic production hinges. Despite its early promise to help Marius experience a "full or complete life, a life of various yet select sensation," Epicureanism's aim to become virgin to experience ultimately reveals itself to be at variance with the chief goal of aesthetic education as Pater defines it: "to impart the art [of] relieving the ideal or poetic traits, the elements of distinction in our everyday life" (143, 58). Thus Marius discovers that "the thirst for every kind of experience, encouraged by a philosophy which taught that nothing was intrinsically great or small, good or evil, had ever been at strife in him with a hieratic refinement, in which the boy-priest survived, prompting always the selection of what was perfect of its kind, with subsequent loyal adherence of his soul thereto" (344). The Epicurean rejection of perceptual habit thus makes impossible both the aesthetic and the moral judgments underwritten by a *sensus communis*.

Marius the Epicurean therefore attempts to accommodate the negative liberty of perception with the ethical and aesthetic imperative to participate in common sense by turning to the dynamics of influence. Cornelius Fronto, the Stoic tutor of Marcus Aurelius, takes the relationship between influence and the ethics of common sense as the subject of his public discourse on "*The Nature of Morals*" (243). Fronto's discourse directly addresses the ethical dilemma that Marius finds himself increasingly haunted by: what possible foundation for ethical values can exist if one has rejected the norms that define *sensus communis*? At this stage in his development, Marius has begun "questioning himself with much impatience as to the possibility of an

adjustment between his own elaborately thought-out intellectual scheme and the ‘old morality’ [that will neither] retard him in his efforts towards a complete, many-sided existence [nor] distort the revelations of the experience of life [nor] curtail his natural liberty of heart and mind” (246). Fronto locates just such a possibility in the idea of a common sense that embodies an aesthetic aristocracy. In even the most rigorously skeptical Epicurean, Fronto argues, there still exists a remnant of “right conduct” that stems not from his choice but from “a deference, an “assent,” entire, habitual, unconscious, to custom—to the actual habit or fashion of others, from whom he could not endure to break away, any more than he would care to be out of agreement with them on questions of mere manner, or, say, even, of dress” (248). The reason for the persistence of these residual habits, Fronto argues, lies “in the purely aesthetic beauty of the old morality, as an element in things, fascinating to the imagination, to good taste in its most highly developed form, through association” (247). Through its beauty and fascination, the old morality conforms the Epicurean skeptic to itself without him realizing it. Its aesthetic power of fascination thus makes possible an ideal form of social relation, a “universal commonwealth of mind” guided by an aesthetic aristocracy (249). This aristocracy has in fact shaped the norms and habits that make up the old morality, and therefore in unconsciously assenting to them one participates in “a select communion of just men made perfect.”

The world is as it were a commonwealth, a city: and there are observances, customs, usages, actually current in it, things our friends and companions will expect of us, as the condition of our living there with them at all, as really their peers or fellow-citizens. Those observances were, indeed, the creation of a visible or invisible aristocracy in it, whose actual manners, whose preferences from of old, become now a weighty tradition as to the way in which things should or should not be done, are like a music to which the intercourse of life

proceeds—such a music as no one who had once caught its harmonies would willingly jar. (249)

Fronto thus imagines an aesthetic republic similar to that envisioned by Dilthey and Lee: an ostensible aesthetic democracy whose citizens' common judgments are in fact the product of an aristocracy's hidden shaping force. The mainspring of this aristocracy of the aesthetic is influence.

Influence provides Marius with the capacity for moral and aesthetic judgments by inscribing in him habits of perception. These influences reach him not through Fronto's abstract appeals to an aesthetic republic but through concrete, particular embodiments of that republic: beautiful objects and beautiful persons. Flavian and, after him, Cornelius bring all the seduction of the beautiful to bear on Marius. Too affecting to be contained within the framework of either his provincial religious habits or his Epicurean ironic skepticism, these beautiful men break in upon Marius with all the force of the "solid world" of real objects (57, 169).¹⁰⁴ In this perceptual ravishing, Flavian and Cornelius seem to expose the insufficiency of Marius' prevailing orthodoxies of perception, their narrow viewpoints on a sensory world that far exceeds their capacities for experience. However, in affecting Marius as they do, Flavian and Cornelius communicate to him an "inward standard...of distinction, selection" with the capacity to shape his perception subsequently (229). On making his original journey with Cornelius, for example, Marius becomes attuned to a beauty in the otherwise "unpleasing," austere aspect of the country and reflects that the landscape "seemed to have been waiting for the passage of this figure to interpret or inform it" (169). Flavian and Cornelius thus in their own persons perform the same role as artworks: that of mediating Marius' perception. Flavian, for example, takes

¹⁰⁴ Pater describes the effects of beauty on Florian in very similar terms in "The Child in the House," as a stream of impressions that works its way into the enclosed world of his childhood associations and habits of perception "as [through] windows left ajar unknowingly, or over the high garden walls" (8).

inspiration for his own literary efforts from the thought that the poet has a “mediatorial function, as between the reader and the actual matter of his experience” (102). Hence the power of aestheticism’s famed golden/yellow/poison book, which Florian and Marius discover when, having hidden away in a granary to read Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, they look up from the novel to their surroundings.

They looked round: the western sun smote through the broad chinks of the shutters. How like a picture! and it was precisely the scene described in what they were reading, with just that added poetic touch in the book which made it delightful and select, and in the actual place, the ray of sunlight transforming the rough grain among the cool brown shadows into heaps of gold. (59)

This passage seemingly circumscribes the select in the scene described in the novel, distinguishing it from the “actual place.” Yet the scene in the book prompts Flavian and Marius to recognize the actual place as “the scene described,” to exclaim that it is “like a picture.” Further, if there is just that “added poetic touch in the book which made it delightful and select,” the ambiguity of the pronoun “it” signals the merging of the scene in the book with the “actual” scene for Flavian and Marius. To exercise this form of influence even becomes an ambition for Marius himself, who moves to Rome to study rhetoric because he, like Flavian, desires to become “the interpreter” of art and sensory experiences for others (153).

Individual objects or persons that influence Marius mediate his contact with the larger, more systemic habits of perception that make up a common sense. Marius regards both Flavian and Cornelius as “sensible exponent[s]” of larger communities and philosophies of perception (231). As the initial heat of personal influence subsides, Marius interprets these beautiful men—Flavian as the embodiment of Epicureanism, Cornelius as that of early Christianity—and thus derives from them a “theory of practice” (231). Influence thus inducts Marius into the common habits

subtending the shared moral and aesthetic judgments of these wider communities, making it possible for him to fulfill the ethical imperative to develop and expand his “sympathy” (270). Influence reveals to him “a venerable system of sentiment and idea, widely extended in time and place, in a kind of impregnable possession of human life...grown inextricably through and through it; penetrating into its laws, its very language, its mere habits of decorum, in a thousand half-conscious ways” (268-9). The influential system of perception, “like some other great products of the conjoint efforts of human mind through many generations, is rich in the world’s experience” (268). Therefore, the expansion of Marius’ sympathy, his participation in a common sense, “has, in itself, the expanding power of a great experience” (268). “It is,” the narrator remarks, drawing a direct analogy to semiotics, “what the coming into possession of a very widely spoken language might be, with a great literature, which is also the speech of the people we have to live among” (268). Yet if the influence of common sense radically enlarges Marius’ experience, it necessarily demands the “curtailing of his liberty” (270). Even at its most new and erotically charged, Cornelius’ influence elicits in Marius “some sense of a constraining tyranny over him from without” (169). While influence thus enables Marius to access the wider experiences of a common sense (and possibly offers some erotic satisfactions as well), it does not by itself fully reconcile beauty with freedom.

Consequently, *Marius* attempts to make space for the negative liberty of perception within an aesthetic experience defined by influence. There are two major critical readings of these attempts. According to Adams, Marius retains a degree of aesthetic agency by remaining open to influence, by refusing to make a final assent to any one perceptual system (*Dandies and Desert Saints* 214-6). Adams points to Marius’ ultimate choice not to convert to Christianity, and his deathbed meditation that “the aim of a true philosophy must lie...in the maintenance of a kind of candid

discontent, in the face of the very highest achievement; the unclouded and receptive soul quitting the world finally, with the same fresh wonder with which it had entered the world still unimpaired” (448). Pater, Adams argues, thus converts the passive posture of being influenced into a strenuous, disciplined effort to retain one’s capacity for various and fresh influencing experiences. Marius’ goal of making his consciousness a *tabula rasa* resolves itself, in a sense, into the perpetual openness to having one’s mind re-written by new experience that, as we have seen in chapter 1, forestalls the erosion of feeling and agency by routinization in Eliot’s and Lewes’ work. Thus the novel seems to bear out Marius’ reflection that his “seemingly active powers of apprehension were, in fact, but susceptibilities to influence” (307). In contrast, Douglas Mao locates a vital, if diminished, form of agency in the reflective awareness of being influenced, in knowing that we are under the burden of necessity and reflecting on its workings. Mao’s analysis, which centers on Pater’s earlier work, emphasizes Pater’s suggestions that “we feel a certain transcendence of our determinations when we contemplate them” (Mao 80).¹⁰⁵ Mao cites the declaration, in the concluding passages of “Winckelmann,” that the modern mind has grasped that contemporary life is fully shaped by a “magic web [of necessity] woven through and through us...penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtlest nerves” and that modern art should therefore “represent men and women in these bewildering toils so as to give the spirit at least an equivalent for the sense of freedom” (R 148-9). In *Marius*, this line of thought plays out in the trajectory of influence: initially ravished by the beautiful, Marius proceeds to reflectively interpret the aesthetic objects that influence him, to regard them as sensible exponents of a particular “theory of practice” (231). Hence the narrator compares the “authority” of a common sense ultimately

¹⁰⁵ Mao’s argument here is indebted to Jonathan Freedman’s claim that Pater sought by such dialectical reversal to obtain an “aesthetic mastery over Necessity.” See Freedman, 66.

grounded in the preferences and traditions of an aesthetic aristocracy to “some beautiful and venerable ritual, in which every observance is become spontaneous and almost mechanical, yet is found, the more carefully one considers it, to have a reasonable significance and a real history” (270).

Critics have so far overlooked a third strategy that Pater employs to prevent the individual aesthete’s agency from being reduced to a nullity by influence: harmonic perception. Both in *Marius* and his other writings, Pater insistently figures participation in a common sense as a kind of music. Fronto, for example, represents the aesthetic traditions in his ideal commonwealth as “a music to which the intercourse of life proceeds—such a music as no one who had once caught its harmonies would willingly jar” (249). Marius himself echoes this language, reflecting that the old Greek morality “was certainly a comely thing.—Yes! a harmony, a music, in men’s ways, one might well hesitate to jar” (262). In part, these tropes evoke the late Victorian belief in music’s special capacity for influence, its distinctive ability to play upon the consciousnesses of its hearers. As we have seen, Pater employs this metaphor of being played upon in “The Child in the House,” when he describes Florian yielding himself to the stimuli in his home “to be played upon by them like a musical instrument” (12). He uses the same figure in *Plato and Platonism* to describe those paragons of militarist discipline, the Spartans, as also “like some perfect musical instrument, perfectly responsive to the intention, to the lightest touch, of the finger of law” (*Plato and Platonism* 72). In this context, Pater’s musical metaphors seem an unpromising place to locate an attempt to reconcile the negative liberty of perception with the plucking finger of law. Yet Pater’s musical tropes are more than just a simple figure for being played on. Music, as I argue above, became especially charged with anxiety over compromised autonomy in the late Victorian period partly because its ostensible lack of represented content made its inscrutable workings on its hearers all

the more insidious and unpredictable. In “The School of Giorgione,” however, Pater employs music as the type of a particular form of aesthetic representation: that which, having achieved a “union” of form and content, presents them both as “one single effect to the ‘imaginative reason’” (*The Renaissance* 88).

Music provides Pater not with a figure for involuntary aesthetic response, nor with a type of pure formalism, but rather a model for perceptual synthesis, the cognitive act that organizes disparate mental contents into a unity. Music, as Pater suggests again and again in *Plato and Platonism*, realizes a “unity in variety,” an “order...within apparent chaos” (52). In *Marius*, Heraclitus, in whose thought radical skepticism is but the first and “easiest step,” similarly locates the possibility of an order amid chaos using musical figures.

In this ‘perpetual flux’ of minds and things, there was, as Heraclitus conceived, a continuance, if not of their material or spiritual elements, yet of orderly intelligible relationships, like the harmony of musical notes, wrought out in and through the series of their mutations—ordinances of the divine reason, maintained throughout the change of the phenomenal world : and this harmony in their mutation and opposition, was a principle of sanity and reality in things.
(132)

Heraclitus’ harmony likewise functions as a principle of order by aiding the conceptualization of a unity-in-variety. Harmony here denotes the combined effect of discrete moments, the unity of categorically separate and heterogeneous experiences that are nonetheless best understood when brought into relation to each other.

Although Pater does not spell it out here, harmony seems nothing so much as a perceptual economy that heightens the experience of any given moment by gathering up into it the memories of past experiences. In the first flush of his Epicureanism, Marius assumes that his new aesthetic philosophy, having filed down knowledge to

one's immediate sense impressions of "what is near at hand," will also lay down rules by which to intensify his sensory experience through a harmony of heterogeneous moments amid the flux.

Such a theory, at more leisable moments, would, of course, have its precepts to propound, on the embellishment, generally, of what is near at hand, on the adornment of life; till, in a not impracticable rule of conduct, one's existence from day to day, would come to be like a well-executed piece of music; that 'perpetual motion' in things (so Marius figured the matter to himself, under the old Greek imageries) according itself to a kind of cadence or harmony. (150)

Marius may be employing figures drawn from Pythagoras, but the tacit suggestion that one embellishes aesthetic experience through a kind of cadence or harmony equally recalls Wundt's description of apperception, in which the mind gathers together the separate beats of a metronome into the cumulative impression of a rhythm. The intensification of experience made possible through the harmonic synthesizing of multiple, heterogeneous moments seems a means of fulfilling Pater's famous exhortations in the "Conclusion." Charging any given moment with the experiences of multiple, disparate moments is certainly one way to maximize the relatively small number of moments given to us mortals, to achieve a "quickened, multiplied consciousness" by "getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time" (R 153). Marius therefore recognizes that refusing to harmonize his own perception with the aesthetico-moral order would be "untrue to the well-considered economy of life he had brought to Rome with him" (270). If experience, and not the fruit of experience, is the end, Pater nonetheless suggests in *Marius* that, through a kind of harmonic perception, one of the fruits of experience is the capacity for the intensification of experience.

Pater's exploration of the tension between the negative liberty of perception and common sense needs to be re-considered in the context of his use of harmony—in line with late Victorian cognitive science—as a figure for this heightened perceptual economy. Fronto's argument and Marius' reflection that participation in an aesthetico-moral *sensus communis* makes possible a “harmony, a music in men's ways” are consonant with the claims elsewhere that this participation enables the aesthete to appropriate and tap into “the world's experience” (262, 268). To adapt the phrase from “The Child in the House,” common sense provides us with “a complimentary strain or burden, applied to our every-day existence, whereby the stray snatches of music in it re-set themselves, and fall into the scheme of some higher and more consistent harmony” (15). Thus Marius finds in his visit to the Christian community that, animated by the new aesthetico-moral order, much of what he most values in the world has been preserved but “heightened and harmonized by some transforming spirit which, in its dealing with the elements of the old world, was guided by a wonderful tact of selection, exclusion, juxtaposition” (353). While this harmony with a common sense influences and constrains the aesthete's sensory experience, harmony by definition also presupposes a degree of difference, of heterogeneity, between the aesthete's sensory impressions and the body of impressions that make up the *sensus communis*. This heterogeneity provides the theoretical grounds for the preservation of the negative liberty of perception, for the autonomy and unique particularity of one's own concrete sensory experience, even while that experience is set to the larger, encompassing music of one's social environment. Hence, Pater's narrator claims, Epicureanism can be “harmonised” with an aesthetico-moral common sense, despite their formal opposition (266). Using the language of theology, the narrator argues that Epicureanism's absolute rejection of common sense renders it a heresy—a willful and misguided exaggeration of ideas or values already

present in the prevailing body of doctrine. Were it but harmonized, did it but have “its proper complement,” were it but referred “as a part to the whole, to that larger, well-adjusted system of the old morality,” Epicureanism, in both its ancient and modern form, would be not a heresy but a “counsel of perfection,” a freely permitted special emphasis on a particular aspect of the common life (268-9, 266). Similarly, the individual Epicurean who has harmonized his own perception with the aesthetic-moral order still “finds his special apprehension of the fact of life, amid all his own personal colour of mind and temper—finds himself again—though it be but as a single element in an imposing system, a wonderful harmony of principles, exerting a strange power to sustain—to carry him and his effort still onward to perfection” (269). Harmony, in short, provides Pater with a model for perception capable of at least tentatively reconciling the negative liberty of perception with the authority of common sense. Through harmony, the aesthete’s individual sensory experience is at once distinct from and encompassed by the aesthetico-moral order.¹⁰⁶ If Marius does not finally foreclose the possibility of new influences and new aesthetic and moral values by definitively embracing Christianity, he yet recognizes that liberty of perception is invariably defined in relation to the common sense that provides its necessary context and condition.

¹⁰⁶ In this respect, the dynamics of harmony resemble Pater’s concept of aesthetic poetry, which, according to Williams, “imitates a former age and poetic style, not with the mimetic aim of reproducing the former age, but with the antithetical aim of differentiating it *from*, and the synthetic aim of comprehending it *within*, the present” (Williams, 58, emphasizes hers).

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