IDEAS OF BOOKS AND READING IN LITERATURE, 1880–1914

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SUMMARY

This thesis elucidates some of the ways in which concerns about the status of 'the book' at the end of the nineteenth century both inform and are, in turn, informed by the representation of books in the period's fiction. Focusing on the work of Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, M.R. James and E.M. Forster, I argue that their fiction places a discursive 'idea' of the book at the centre of a range of socio-political debates in which literary texts participate and which they also help to shape. In particular, I argue that the fragmentation of dominant nineteenth-century print-cultural institutions forms an important context for these authors' preoccupation with the ability of the written word to refract ideas and experiences it purports accurately to reflect. In Wilde's work, for example, books are simultaneously the facilitators of panoptic surveillance and sites upon which, by asserting their right to a wholly subjective interpretation of text, readers can resist such surveillance. Stevenson's adventure fiction is underscored by similar anxieties about the insidious formative influence of fiction – anxieties that lead him to adopt a range of metafictional strategies, designed to draw the reader's attention to the book as the product of a specific marketplace. James and Forster's fiction goes further, using books as the symbol of a wider epistemological crisis that underscores turn-of-the-century reading practices. Ultimately all four writers reject, in different ways, a utilitarian conception of books as repositories for knowledge about the world, to which readers' own subjectivities must become subordinate in order to ensure a 'right' reading. Instead, they foreshadow modern reader response theory, presenting books as sites upon which 'ideas' – the product of a dynamic interaction between text and reader – are continually shaped and reshaped as they circulate within the ideologically-charged materiality of a particular historical moment.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

This thesis examines the representation of books in the imaginative literature of late-nineteenth-century Britain. It investigates the ways in which such representations reflect and engage with changes in the perception of the book within the wider context of the period's literary history, the ways in which these relate to concurrent changes in perceptions of reading, as well as the extent to which authors' perceptions of these shifting attitudes affect the nature of their own literary productions. Such an enquiry might profitably be made of any given period of literary history – certainly of any point since the 'rise of the novel' in the late eighteenth century. I share, for example, many of the same central objectives as Andrew Piper's *Dreaming in Books* (2009), a study of the book as represented in early-nineteenth-century European and American romanticism. Like Piper's, my work is informed by Jerome McGann's idea that there is 'no such thing as an unmarked text', a statement which encapsulates the idea that the textual meaning of a work of literature is inevitably mediated by the material conditions governing its production, distribution and consumption – and that this is something that nineteenth-century writers always recognised. I also share Piper's concern that, while book history has covered effectively the ways in which 'literature's meaning was shaped by the printed book […] we have overlooked in the process the ways in which literature contributed to shaping the identities of books and the bookish identities of the individuals who used and consumed them'.[1] Although it takes as its point of departure a different period of literary history, therefore, my work is underscored by the same central question as Piper's: 'How did literature make sense of the book so that it in turn made sense to its reader?'[2]

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[1] Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 10.
[2] Ibid. pp. 10-11.

In this introductory chapter, I will use a striking passage from Thomas Hardy's novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) as a focal point through which to introduce some of the ways in which representations of books within late-Victorian fiction provided a means of working through the changing cultural status of the book within a rapidly evolving print culture, before moving on to articulate some of the wider intellectual and methodological questions that a study of books in fiction might help literary critics and historians of the book alike to address.

i. Tess's absent novels

'Why didn't you tell me there was danger? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to guard against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had a chance of discovering in that way, and you did not help me!'[3]

This is Thomas Hardy's Tess addressing her mother, upon returning from Alec d'Urberville's house a 'fallen woman'. The reference to novel reading at this point in the story emphasises a textual encounter (or rather the absence of one), which will have a devastating effect upon subsequent narrative developments. In presenting reading as a biographical intervention with the ability to confer autonomy on those who have access to novels, however, the extract also has relevance for female readers of Hardy's novel. The central position of the taboo subject of rape marks out *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* as precisely the kind of novel Tess regards as able to intervene fortuitously in a young woman's education: energising the book in the reader's hands, its evocation of books

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[3] Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 82.

like itself signals the volume's ability to have a very real effect on the course of its (female) reader's life. It makes available to the reader what Tess feels she has been denied: knowledge enabling the recognition of dangers faced by young women in a world of sexually-aggressive men. Hardy's novel is a potent example of the kinds of issues at stake when books appear (or even, as in this case, conspicuously fail to appear) in fictional narratives. It demonstrates how even the most apparently inconsequential representation or even mention of books in fiction can signal a text's situation within specific contemporary debates concerning the role(s) of books in the wider culture in which that fiction was produced and circulated.

Tess's assertion about novel reading is significant on three counts. By depriving her of knowledge of 'what to guard against' it is the indirect cause of her 'fall': an absent reading act thus implicitly underpins subsequent narrative developments. At the same time, her assumptions about the ability of books to intervene in the lives of individual readers reflects the text's interaction with contemporary literary debates by signalling its position in an ongoing controversy concerning the kinds of books to which (young female) readers could and should gain access. Finally, as I will argue, an examination of Hardy's participation in those debates helps to determine the ideological position the text adopts and the way in which authors' reactions to the shifting cultural position of books help to determine the kinds of texts they produce.

Tess's outburst is just one in a longstanding metafictional tradition of representing novel reading within the novel itself. What is interesting in this instance, however, is that while, since the mid-nineteenth-century, novel reading was typically construed as pernicious – particularly for women – *Tess* maintains an equally pernicious role for the *absence* of novel reading upon its protagonist. Jacqueline Pearson has shown how discourse on the novel in the eighteenth and early nineteenth

centuries 'tended to think in terms of a binary opposition between "good" and "bad" books', with novels tending to be placed in the latter category.[4] Anti-novel sentiment was rife and its dangers to the female reader everywhere discussed:

> It seems there was hardly any crime, sin or personal catastrophe that injudicious reading was not held to cause directly or indirectly – from murder, suicide, rape, and violent revolution, through prostitution, adultery and divorce, to pride, vanity, and slapdash housewifery.[5]

Later-nineteenth-century discourse on the novel tends to be less all-encompassing in its condemnation, but novel reading remained a source of anxiety for many writers, even within novels themselves. The hypothetical consequences of reading novels in *Tess* is in diametric opposition to the tragedies that beset the heroine of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) for whom novels, especially racy French novels 'that she might have better left unread', make life unendurable by setting up a more attractive fictional alternative.[6] Even so, Braddon's portrayal of the female reader remains ambivalent. After all, the narrator assures us, Isabel Gilbert 'did not feed upon garbage, but settled at once upon the highest blossoms in the flower garden of fiction' (Braddon, 28). Such a remark appears to locate the novel within a tradition of defences of the novel *within* novels. Perhaps the most celebrated of these is Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), which satirises the potential vagaries of obsessive and naïve devotion to novelistic convention, whilst simultaneously emphasising the fact that a

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[4] Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 6.
[5] Ibid. p. 8.
[6] Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 27. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

pleasurable immersion in fiction is not problematic in itself. At the same time, the fact

that Isabel reads these works 'over and over again, and wrote little extracts of her own

choosing in penny account-books, usually employed for the entry of butcher's meat and

grocery' implies that excessive fondness for fiction has led her away from the proper

feminine sphere of domestic management (Braddon, 28). Such a remark suggests that

there are plenty of 'respectable' novels that the female reader might read without

incurring harm and that it is the way in which novels are read that is at fault. Yet, the

way in which novels metaphorically colonise the books which Isabel, in her role as

angel of the house, should be consulting, maintains a persistent stereotype of novel

reading as one that can lead women astray from their 'proper' sphere.[7]

A novel contemporaneous with Hardy's, Marie Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan*

(1895), continues the early-nineteenth-century concern with the novel's capacity to

corrupt the female reader by making her other than the pure protectress of virtuous

familial domesticity. In that novel, Lady Sybil Elton describes how reading has made

her a 'contaminated creature, trained to perfection in the lax morals and prurient

literature of my day'.[8] The kind of details that, in Hardy's novel, would have spared

Tess her ordeal, are condemned in Corelli's text on the basis that they lead to

immorality in life. It is novel reading that renders Sybil – for whom there is 'nothing in

the rôle of marriage that I do not know, though I am not yet twenty' – a 'fallen' woman

(Corelli, 204). Indeed, Sybil's reading eventually results in her literal damnation. Her

suicide note is a veritable *biographia literaria* of corruption: 'All the fashionable fiction

of the day passed through my hands, much to my gradual enlightenment, if not to my

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[7] For a full literary-historical discussion on the conceptualisation of the female novel reader within the
fictional narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Pearson, Chapter 7 and Kate Flint, *The
Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Chapters 9, 10 and 11.
[8] Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan* (London: Methuen, 1895), p. 202. Further references are to this
edition and appear in the body of the text.

edification […] and little by little the insidious abomination of it filtered into my mind and *stayed there*.' (Corelli, 405; Corelli's emphasis) For Tess, however, the novel's capacity to 'enlighten' is also the very thing that, by alerting her to the dangers of men, would have allowed her to avoid the 'corruption' Corelli fears, ensuring that apparently 'corrupt' texts are also, potentially, the most 'edifying'.[9]

Such an argument would have carried especial weight in the context of late-Victorian book production. During the second half of the nineteenth century, changes in publishing, distribution and readership had a far-reaching effect not only on the forms taken by books, but also on the manner in which those books were obtained and consumed. These led, in turn, to fiercely-debated changes in the ways in which books were perceived as commodities in a literary marketplace. As a device that both reflects and comments upon the connection between 'ladies' and 'novels' in the period, whilst linking both to social and material conditions that disenfranchise her as a reader, Tess's outburst provides an illuminating example of how fiction can interact with such debates to conjure an historically locatable idea of the book.

The three-volume novel, consolidated by the success of Scott's historical fiction earlier in the century, had evolved during the Victorian period to become the standard format for fiction in book form. Since the publication of Scott's *Kenilworth* (1821), the prohibitive cost of 31s 6d for a new triple-decker ensured that the vast majority of readers had little choice but to rely on circulating libraries for new novels.

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[9] Space does not permit a detailed consideration of whether what exactly happens to Tess constitutes rape, deception, 'corruption', seduction or simply an uneasy and uninformed acquiescence to sexual temptation. Such distinctions are impossible to disentangle from the various revisions undertaken by Hardy between the late 1880s and 1919, not least because 'what exactly happens' is made impossible to determine amongst a series of revisions that continually change the exact circumstances of the experience Tess undergoes. Tim Dolin provides an excellent account of Hardy's revisions in Hardy, *Tess*, pp. lii-lxvi. My contention here, however, is that, whatever the narrative facts governing Tess's ordeal, the significance of Tess's pained chastisement of her mother regarding the way in which knowledge has been concealed from her remains in force as a means of using her ordeal (whatever it might be) to illustrate a wider point about female reading and sexual autonomy.

Consequently, the 'triple-decker' became a reliable commodity for publishers, for whom the circulating libraries would provide a ready market.[10] The most notable circulating library was Charles Edward Mudie's 'select' library, founded in 1842. When, in 1864, Mudie's was in danger of bankruptcy, publishers came to his aid and, from the mid-1860s onwards, publishers actually attained a major shareholding in the company, consolidating a mutual interest in maintaining the three-volume form.[11]

Other means of procuring novels were, of course, available. 'Railway' novels, sold on the platforms of stations, provided access to cheap editions, usually of older titles. At mid-century, authors such as Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope achieved success with the monthly part-issue of new novels. From the late 1850s onwards, the abolition of the 'taxes on knowledge'[12] precipitated a surfeit of new magazines aimed at middle-class families, with the result that the first appearance of novels was increasingly in the form of serialisation within the pages of respectable (and affordable) weekly periodicals.[13] The circulating library, however, monopolised the first appearance of novels in book form. As Simon Eliot reminds us, '[n]o other novelist was able to make the cultural and economic success out of monthly parts that Dickens achieved, though many tried' and the form had all but died out by 1880.[14] Moreover, 'serialization did not inhibit later publication as a three-decker novel: indeed, by the

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[10] On the origin of the three-decker as the dominant form of the novel in the nineteenth century, see John Feather, *A History of British Publishing* (Beckenham, Kent: Croom Helm, 1988), pp. 150-52. For a detailed discussion of the importance of the circulating libraries to both the prosperity and the ultimate downfall of the three-volume form, and on book production and distribution in the period more generally, see Guinevere L. Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970) and the first chapter of Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1975-1914* (London: Fontana Press, 1991).

[11] See David Finkelstein, 'The Secret: British Publishers and Mudie's Struggle for Economic Survival', *Publishing History*, 34 (Autumn 1993), 21-50.

[12] Advertisement, stamp and paper duties – abolished in 1853, 1855 and 1860, respectively.

[13] For an account of the rise and extraordinary success of these publications and of magazine serials more generally, see the case studies in Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

[14] Simon Eliot, 'The Business of Victorian Publishing' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 37-60 (48). See also John Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 87-106.

1870s and 1880s it was commonly the case that a novel, serialized in twelve monthly episodes in a magazine, would also appear as a three-decker when its run in the magazine was about three-quarters through.'[15] Ultimately, therefore, success for new fiction in volume form continued to depend upon the libraries' patronage.[16]

Such dominance lent the libraries tremendous power over the content of new works. A subscription to a library made the establishment's stock available to an entire family of readers and certain subjects were out of the question if the blushes of younger family members (or rather their parents) were to be spared.[17] By the end of the century, librarians' decisions on the morality or otherwise of a text began increasingly to draw accusations of moral and artistic philistinism. George Moore's pamphlet *Literature at Nurse* (1885), for example, savagely attacks the stifling effect of the libraries on new authors and argues that the necessity of keeping certain literary works from the eyes of young people should not hinder an artist's right to present and discuss controversial issues in the manner they deemed most suitable. Moore insisted that the libraries' influence had created a dominant literature characterised by a stultifying conventionality as a democratic pantheon of individual authors with individual ideas became subservient to the moral ideals of one institution or even of one man.[18] If literature was to say anything at all about life as it was actually led, or to address any of the less savoury aspects of human existence, it would have first to transcend the unfortunate constraints that the libraries imposed – constraints which entailed the circulation not of 'literature', but of 'morals'.[19]

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[15] Eliot, 'Business of Victorian Publishing', p. 49.

[16] For examples of quite how stringent publishers could be in upholding the three-volume form, as well as the libraries' importance as the primary distributor of a novel in book form, see Griest, pp. 54-56.

[17] See Kate Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and its Readers' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. David, pp. 17-36 (24).

[18] In this case, Mudie, at whom Moore's complaint is primarily (and personally) addressed. For a full discussion of the Mudie-Moore dispute, see Griest, pp. 148-155.

[19] See Griest, p. 215.

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, however, the appearance of a greater number of cheaper one-volume first editions and a veritable tidal wave of new periodicals began to spell the end for the three-volume novel by offering alternative vehicles for fiction. Book buying began to become more common, whilst a much wider choice of journals and newspapers ensured that the libraries ceased to be the dominant distributor of printed materials. The 6s one-volume first-edition, emergent during the mid 1880s and firmly established by the 1890s, was made possible by reductions in publishing costs and made new novels available to the public by direct purchase. Authors adopting such a medium did not need to cater for an entire household of library subscribers and thus were not susceptible to the censorship of the likes of Mudie and W.H. Smith. Moore was one of the first authors to publish his fiction in 6s first editions and he did so in explicit defiance of what he saw as the censorship of a tradesman 'scarcely competent to decide the delicate and difficult artistic questions that authors in their struggles for new ideals might raise'.[20] Moore had taken offence when Mudie refused to stock his first novel, *A Modern Lover* (1883), on the grounds of its open treatment of its heroine's extra-marital affair. Rather than agree to Mudie's suggestion that he write in three volumes on less controversial themes, Moore determined 'to issue my next book at a purchasable price, and so enable me to appeal direct to the public'. His message to the librarians was clear – 'I, at least, will have done with you' – and others were implicitly encouraged to follow suit (Moore, 4).

By the time *Tess* was published at the beginning of the 1890s, the idea of one-volume first publication had become increasingly common.[21] As the pattern for

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[20] George Moore, *Literature at Nurse* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1978), p. 3. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

[21] Keating notes that, while the number of new adult novels rose steadily from 755 in 1886 to 1,315 in 1894, only 184 of those published in the latter year took the traditional three-decker form. For the circulating libraries, which had hitherto controlled the market, this entailed a significant and continuous

acquiring new works shifted from public borrowing to private purchase, 'the breaking down of the thirty-one and sixpenny safeguards' called for by Moore became increasingly a reality. Authors came more and more to disregard the concerns of the 'British Matron' and began to talk ever more candidly about issues such as divorce, pre-marital sex, free love and the radical ideas of the 'New Woman', in works no longer kept in check by the libraries' careful demands. With every new novel published, it seemed, at least in theory, to be increasingly 'in the power of a young girl to buy an immoral book if she chooses to do so' (Moore, 22).

As literature evaded the watchful eye of its prudish 'nurse', the issues Moore raised came earnestly and widely to be discussed. In 1890, for instance, the *New Review* published 'Candour in English Fiction', a forum article containing pieces by Walter Besant, Eliza Lynn Linton and Hardy. The article addressed the dilemma facing authors who wished to reconcile the impulse to shield minors from unsuitable texts with an artist's determination to represent 'human nature as it is'.[22] Linton voiced the fundamental issue:

> To whom ought Fiction to be addressed? – exclusively to the Young Person? or may not men and women, who know life, have their acre to themselves where the ingénue has no business to intrude? Must men go without meat because the babes must be fed with milk? ('Candour', 11)

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increase in the competition, which eventually led to Mudie's ultimatum to publishers, issued in 1894, stating that it would no longer pay more than 4s per volume for new fictional works and that book publishers must wait a year before reprinting in cheaper editions those works sold to the libraries – an ultimatum that killed off the three-decker by terminating its viability as a commercial enterprise (Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 32).

[22] Eliza Lynn Linton in Walter Besant, Eliza Lynn Linton and Thomas Hardy, 'Candour in English Fiction', *New Review*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Jan 1890), 6-21 (10). Further references to this forum appear (as 'Candour') in the body of the text.

Hardy echoes Linton's sentiments, calling for 'a sincere school of Fiction' ('Candour', 15) and lamenting the fact that 'English society opposes a well-nigh insuperable bar' to the discussion of the 'sexual relationship as it is' ('Candour', 17). He is in no doubt that it is 'the magazine and the circulating library' that are responsible for this 'insuperable bar'. Their obsessive desire 'to suit themselves to what is called household reading' ensures that they 'do not foster the growth of the novel which reflects and reveals life'. Instead, the novelist is forced to maintain a less contentious reflection of the relationships between the sexes, in order to protect the innocence of younger family members ('Candour', 17).

Debates about literary propriety, of the kind embodied in the *New Review*, had been going on throughout the period. Deborah Wynne notes, for example, that during the 1860s '[t]he sensation novel became legitimate reading for the middle classes largely *because of* its magazine context, where readers were addressed as educated and domestic family members, rather than sensation-seekers after cheap thrills.' At the same time, this context also rendered the serialised sensation novel controversial precisely because it 'combine[d] the "respectable" and "scandalous"'.[23] In literary terms, the sensation narratives not only dramatised criminal occurrences and behaviour unsuitable for reading within the domestic sphere but, dangerously, were also a version of lower-class literary forms. However, as Wynne points out, '[t]he crudity of the crimes and passions represented in popular Sunday newspapers, and the fictional versions in "penny dreadfuls", was toned down considerably in the sensation novel'. Moreover, the genre's debts 'were not limited to the popular culture of the working class. Its success also depended upon its reworking of popular domestic novels'. Wynne cites Winifred Hughes, who observes that the genre attempted to balance 'the opposing

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[23] Wynne, p. 1.

realms of romance and domesticity'.[24] In doing so, the magazines' role as literary nurses, policing the reading of the middle-class Victorian family, was still in force. Indeed, Hardy's reference to 'the magazine and the circulating library' is further evidence that serial publication became imbricated in, rather than overcame, the moral constraints of the three-decker.

Unlike the debate surrounding sensation literature, which questioned whether such fiction was suitable for the domestic context for which it was explicitly written, the *New Review* forum contemplates the validity of requiring that fiction be exclusively tailored to that context at all. Moreover, Hardy's proposed resolution of the situation differs wildly from his fellow contributors'. For Besant, frank discussion of unconventional sexual relationships was only acceptable when the work emphasised 'that such Love is outside the social pale and is destructive of the very basis of society' ('Candour', 9). Such a recognition mitigates candid discussion by legitimating only those representations that emphasise clearly the immorality of the behaviour portrayed. Linton's suggestion that certain works be confined to a 'locked bookcase' and rendered unobtainable for underage readers is similarly founded on swapping old restrictions for new.

In dividing literature into works which budding adults should be free to read and those which they should not, Linton echoes Moore's suggestion that 'young people should be provided with a literature suited to their age and taste' (Moore, 21). Whilst advocating a less restrained fictional analysis of human relationships, Moore shares with Besant and Linton the idea that candour is unsuitable in works dealing with a readership that might include younger readers. In so doing, they fail fundamentally to change the terms of the debate in which they are engaged. The need to protect the moral

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[24] Ibid. p. 10.

innocence of young readers (and young women in particular) remains central; all that is

called into question is the extent to which such an aim is to interfere with the scope for

presenting adult readers with the artistic expression of contentious ideas.[25] Hardy, on

the other hand, detects a fundamental hypocrisy in those 'adults who would desire true

views for their own reading [but] insist […] upon false views for the reading of their

young people' ('Candour', 17). Ultimately, he foregrounds the importance of 'candour'

in fiction, regardless of the eventual reader's identity: 'all fiction should not be shackled

by conventions concerning budding womanhood, which may be altogether false'

('Candour', 20).

It is significant, therefore, that Tess's outburst to her mother places the heroine's

inability to access certain books at the very root of the tragedy subsequently played out.

Her recent experiences leave the reader in little doubt what kind of subject matter the

'novels' in question might have contained. Yet, far from corrupting the young woman,

a fortuitous encounter with a more candid examination of human sexual relations is

offered as a means not of encouraging impulses better suppressed, but of preparing her

for the possibility of having to fight to protect her maidenhood. An apparently

inconsequential remark about novel-reading ensures, therefore, that this is, on one level,

a work profoundly concerned with demonstrating what happens when young women

are not allowed to read certain kinds of books – a reading for which the *New Review*

article, written at the same time as Hardy was working on *Tess*, prepares us.

The question of Tess's working-class origins and the fact that her outburst

specifically mentions the privileges of 'ladies' also create a useful intertext with Sybil

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[25] Felicity A. Hughes has observed in her commentary on Moore's pamphlet, that 'the proposed solution [to the dilemma of literary candour] is not that adults should allow formerly prohibited topics to be discussed in front of the children, but that [the] child should be excluded so that adults can discuss such matters among themselves' (Felicity A. Hughes, 'Children's Literature: Theory and Practice', *ELH*, Vol. 45, No. 3 [Autumn 1978], 542-61 [548]). The first two contributions to the *New Review* forum suggest that Hughes's observations could also be applied to the contemporary debate on literary propriety more generally.

Elton in *The Sorrows of Satan*, revealing the class issues at play in Tess's complaint. Hardy's and Corelli's novels take up a position within several contemporary debates which themselves respond to perceived changes in the conditions in which books in general, and novels in particular, were obtained and consumed. Most obviously, both texts raise issues of literary propriety. Yet, they adopt very different positions concerning the kinds of knowledge fictional texts should offer, and exemplify those positions with two very different young female readers. While Tess's situation signals the corruption that might ensue should certain kinds of readers be *denied* certain kinds of knowledge, Lady Sybil's situation points to the corruption that might ensue should young ladies be *given* access to the same kinds of knowledge. Concomitantly, Lady Sybil claims that the suppression – rather than, as Tess argues, the free dissemination – of such books will protect 'the old-fashioned types of the modest maiden and the immaculate matron' (Corelli, 372).

In fact, as an adolescent girl whose mother is accused of hiding from her the kind of information that 'ladies' get from novels, Tess represents the failure of precisely the middle-class safeguards which suppression, in literature, are intended to enact. Rejecting the novel on behalf of *Murray's Magazine*, for instance, Edward Arnold wrote to its author:

> I know well enough that these tragedies are being played out every day in our midst, but I believe the less publicity they have the better, and that it is quite possible and very desirable for women to grow up and pass through life without the knowledge of them.[26]

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[26] Edward Arnold, letter to Hardy, 1889, quoted in Mary Jacobus, 'Tess's Purity', *Essays in Criticism*, 26 (1976), 318-38 (322).

Illustrating how women of high and low class are kept alike in the dark by a literary conspiracy of silence, Tess's reference to 'ladies' foregrounds her working-class origin as an exacerbating factor in her ignorance. Yet the absence of candour within novels that middle-class young 'ladies' might read, ensures that 'ladies' labour under the same burden of ignorance as Tess – a young woman whose class totally denies her access to novels. In this way, the passage locates restrictions upon novelistic candour within a wider nexus of class and gender discrimination, which imbricate with each other as they converge on Tess. It tacitly criticises the double standard involved in the 'fallen woman' formulation, absolving Tess of any responsibility in her 'fall' from virginity. Her inability to make an informed decision means that the well-meaning censor is, in his way, as culpable as Alec.

In emphasising its radicalism, my reading of Hardy's contribution to the *New Review* disagrees fundamentally with Patricia Ingham's, for whom Hardy's stance is characterised by an attempt 'to placate critics he has […] declared irrelevant': 'he doubles back on himself by apparently accepting that naturalistic accounts of sexual relationships should be censored for moral subversiveness. They should not and would not "exhibit lax views of that purity of life upon which the well-being of society depends".'[27] The passage Ingham quotes seems to imply that, despite his plea that literature be allowed faithfully to represent 'the crash of broken commandments' ('Candour', 18), Hardy actually shares his fellow novelists' insistence that some form of pragmatic reticence is still essential. It is worth quoting the original passage in full, however, so that Hardy's statement might be viewed in context:

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[27] Patricia Ingham, *Feminist Readings: Thomas Hardy* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 64.

There should be no mistaking the matter, no half measures. *La dignité de la pensée*, in the words of Pascal, might then grow to be at last recognised in the treatment of fiction as in other things, and untrammelled adult opinion on conduct and theology might be axiomatically appealed to. Nothing in such literature should for a moment exhibit lax views of that purity of life upon which the well being of society depends; but the position of man and woman – things which everybody is thinking but nobody is saying – might be taken up and treated frankly. ('Candour', 21)

It is not difficult to see how Hardy's final reassurance that 'lax views' on the subject of 'purity of life' should be avoided at all cost could be taken as a 'doubling back' on his argument for absolute artistic freedom. Neither can it be denied that there is a world of difference between the totalitarian insistence on 'no half measures' and the later concession to conventional notions of 'purity'. Nevertheless, the outraged reviews of *Tess* would suggest that Hardy's idea of what constituted 'lax' morals was not the same as many of his readers'.

In fact, Ingham ignores the notoriously unstable use of the term 'purity' in Hardy's work. On the title page of the first edition, the narrative is offered as that of 'A Pure Woman / Faithfully Presented'. As Mary Jacobus has emphasised, '[t]o invoke purity in connection with a career that includes not simply seduction, but collapse into kept woman and murderess, taxes the linguistic resources of the most permissive conventional moralist'.[28] Indeed, since the mid-1980s, poststructuralist readings of the novel have led to an increasing critical consensus that Hardy's subtitle is intended deliberately to confound and challenge the conventional meaning of the word 'purity'

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[28] Jacobus, pp. 319-20.

without attempting to provide an uncomplicated alternative. John Goode has suggested

that the term 'faithfully presented' is intended to evoke a similar ambiguity,

deliberately drawing attention to the novel's challenge to conventional perceptions. For

him, the subtitle offers a double challenge, 'first to the moral values it expects to

encounter and contest, and secondly to an aesthetic judgement – what is "pure", what is

"faithful"?'[29] Peter Widdowson agrees, arguing that the phrasing suggests an anti-

humanist manoeuvre on Hardy's part, an attempt at 'discrediting the notion that there is

an ultimate reality, or true essence, outside of history and discourse – such as "human

nature", for example, or even perhaps: *pure woman*'.[30] Ultimately, the novel is not

'attempting to offer us a "knowable" character, but rather one which […] parades the

*mis*representation that "characterisation" involves by subjecting to irony the falsifying

essentialism of "faithfully presenting a pure woman"'.[31] For Widdowson, the opening

description of Tess as 'pure' and of the novel as a 'faithful' presentation cannot be

reconciled with a text that openly contradicts conventional notions of both. Instead, the

novel's subtitle (and the novel itself) is seen as a deliberate attempt to call into question

accepted definitions of 'purity'.

For Jacobus, to label Tess 'a pure woman' is to regard her 'as somehow immune

to the experiences she undergoes'. The heroine is rendered 'pure' only because of her

inability to understand what has happened to her; exonerated of responsibility, she is

stripped of 'tragic status – reduced throughout to the victim she does indeed become'.[32]

I would argue, however, that any such exoneration is part of the point that the novel

makes about the sensibleness of allowing young women untrammeled access to

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[29] John Goode, *Thomas Hardy: The Offensive Truth* (Oxford and NY: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 110.
[30] Peter Widdowson, 'Introduction: "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" Faithfully Presented By' in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: Contemporary Critical Essays (New Casebooks)*, ed. Peter Widdowson (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 1-23 (3); Widdowson's emphases.
[31] Widdowson, p. 20; emphasis in original
[32] Jacobus, p. 320

'candid' literature. Tess is not devoid of understanding of what has happened, once it *has* happened. In short, she is not robbed of understanding, but of autonomy since, as she herself notes, she has been denied the knowledge that would have helped her to understand in advance that such things *could* happen: knowledge of 'what to guard against'. Access to novels, even to texts as notoriously unstable as *Tess*, would nevertheless have given the novel's own heroine an enhanced view of the world in which she is to participate. In being allowed angrily to voice such an idea for herself, Tess's eventual victim status serves, paradoxically, only to emphasise what might occur if women are not allowed to read unfettered. A chance to react to a textual representation, however unstable, could help prepare a young woman like Tess for a similar situation in the narrative of her own life. Such an encounter, though hypothetical and imagined, would arm her with the power to retain precisely the 'purity' that conventional moralists wished to guarantee – but which also led them to censor and suppress the knowledge essential to retaining it. Between *Tess* and the *New Review*, Hardy offers a choice to those who wish to uphold the moral censorship of literary works: allow young readers to read more candid accounts of human relationships, at the cost of any 'purity' of imagination that ignorance might lend; or allow them to remain unenlightened, but in danger of losing that 'purity' in life.

Returning to the *New Review* essay in light of these criticisms therefore, we must perform our own 'doubling back' by extending to that essay Widdowson's notion of a post-modern Hardy who evokes apparently settled meanings in order to confound them. If we read the novel's challenge to the accepted definition of 'purity' back into the essay, which precedes it 'as a trailer for the novel',[33] Hardy's reference to that

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[33] T.R Wright, *Hardy and His Readers* (Basingstoke and NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 170; Wright follows Goode and Widdowson in suggesting that Hardy aimed at calling into question traditional definitions of purity without proposing any final redefinition of the term. Accordingly, he argues that

'purity of life upon which the well-being of society depends' seems increasingly ambiguous. Tess exemplifies in her outburst the point which Hardy had already made at length in his *New Review* essay – books are not vessels in which the definition of female purity is offered as a *fait accompli*; rather, they are spaces in which the definition of female purity is able to be discussed openly and reshaped by means of the (female) readers' responses to narrative example, even one that radically posits a 'fallen' woman as 'pure'. Thus, Tess's outburst takes up a position in a contemporary debate about the way in which books actively participate not simply in mirroring, but also in creating and enforcing contemporary socio-political realities, as well as the role played in that process by the material conditions governing the consumption of novels.

The extent to which this is the case can be gauged from an anecdote, told by the publisher Harold Macmillan, and recounted by James Gibson:

> [A] woman had come up to Hardy while he was talking to Sir Frederick Macmillan (Harold's uncle: 1851-1936) and asked him, 'What did Tess mean to you, Mr Hardy?' After a moment's reflection, Hardy turned to Sir Frederick and said, 'I don't know what she meant to you, Sir Frederick, but she was a good milch-cow to me.' No doubt the woman, failing to recognise Hardy's irony and her own insensitiveness in asking him such a question in a public place, went away convinced that Hardy was concerned only with money.[34]

The woman, seeking to confirm the 'truth' about Tess by recourse to authorial intentionality is as misguided as those critics and early reviewers who sought textual

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Hardy's post-1891 revisions of the text appear 'deliberately to have muddied the waters' in order to complicate 'the whole question of "purity" on which the first edition had been so outspoken' (179).

[34] *Thomas Hardy: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. James Gibson (Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan, 1999), p. 61.

evidence to establish her definitively as either a victim of circumstance or a free agent in her fate. The passionate essay he had written for the *New Review* demonstrates a commitment deeper than the merely financial and makes Hardy's claim to have been 'concerned only with money' difficult to take seriously. Yet, his response is significant in its implication that, whatever Tess 'meant' to her creator, her story is ultimately to be understood as a product arising out of the late nineteenth-century book market: as a book amongst other books.

ii. The 'idea' of the book

Discussing the 'anti-novel literature' of the eighteenth century, Jacqueline Pearson registers her agreement with E.J. Clery's suggestion

> that arguments about the novel were really about larger issues, "unregulated social and economic forces, and the erosion of established hierarchies of value and authority", displaced on to a more manageable canvas, and that relocating these arguments on to the novel disguised a culture-specific issue as one allegedly of timeless universality, [such as] female sexuality.[35]

Yet, notes Pearson, while such debates 'may have been about more than the novel', they were nevertheless 'also about the novel'.[36] Tess's outburst situates *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*'s presentation of novels within a wider debate about the ability of novels to corrupt the woman reader, providing an intertext for contemporary debates about how the material conditions of book distribution and consumption govern not only what was written but also what was read and by whom.

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[35] Quoted in Pearson, p. 196.
[36] Pearson, p. 196.

In Tess's outburst, therefore, the novel frankly recognises its own stance in a debate about novels taking place beyond the text. It reminds us, as William Gass remarks, that '[n]ovels are books and books are objects, and therefore they exist like other objects – they are a space in a space'.[37] Hardy's novel illustrates how fictional evocations of books are not mere props in a game of literary mimesis. They are a means of taking part in a debate about what a book is, what it can and should do, and why all of these things are demonstrably important and pressing questions. Read alongside contemporary debates about the availability of books (and novels in particular), *Tess* demonstrates the way in which to speak of 'the book' is not simply to evoke a tangible object but also a contentious 'idea'. This is doubly so in Tess's case, since the novels she evokes are hypothetical, whilst her assertions about the significant, tangible influence of a specific kind of novelistic candour marks out *Tess* as just the kind of novel she wishes she had: the physical book is present in Tess's outburst only as an 'idea' of the kind of book that does physically exist in the hands of Tess's readers. It throws into relief the way in which the fictional book always represents not the mimetic equivalent of a real physical object but a specific, historically-locatable *concept* of which it is the symbol – so much so that mention of 'novels' can evoke the concept without the physical volumes themselves ever actually appearing as a material object 'faithfully presented'. Drawing attention to the kind of books its protagonist has *not* read, *Tess* illustrates how an apparently physical object is transformed, through literary representation, into an idea.

In speaking of the fictional book as an 'idea', my study has affinities with other work that has sought similarly to examine the history of ideas through an analysis of their representation at a given point in literary or art history. Broadly speaking, studies

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[37] Quoted in Maurice Couturier, *Textual Communication: A print-based theory of the novel* (London and NY: Routledge, 1991), p. 52.

on the representation of 'ideas' within fictional narratives demonstrate how, by redeploying 'ideas' in a specific fictional context, literary texts can contribute to debates about those ideas and play a role in their cultural evolution. Robin Gilmour, for instance, in his examination of the literary treatment of 'the gentleman' in the Victorian period, finds that works by Thackery, Dickens and Trollope are linked by the their fascination for 'the image of the gentleman and its relation to the actual and ideal possibilities for the moral life in society'. However, he is keen to stress such 'fascination' does not yield, in their work, to a direct reflection of an already existing 'idea of the gentleman'. Rather, fiction participates in an ongoing discussion of the issue, arising directly out of a cultural context in which 'the nature of gentlemanliness was more anxiously debated and more variously defined than at any time before or since'.[38]

For Gilmour, to investigate an idea as manifested in the period's literature is not to show how that literature agrees or disagrees with dominant concepts already in existence beyond the text. Rather, it is to attempt to elucidate the ways in which literary representation participates in forming those concepts, reflecting their ambiguous nature and suggesting new cultural formations in an attempt to come to terms with contemporary socio-political change: 'behind the […] anxious debates about who did and did not qualify as a gentleman […] there lies the struggle of a middle-class civilisation to define itself and its values, a process in which the novelists were intimately and sympathetically involved'.[39] Lucy Bending has expressed a similar aim in her recent investigations into representations of bodily pain in the period's writing, professing to deal 'not with the idea of pain as an ultimate sensation, but with

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[38] Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 2.
[39] Ibid. p. 14.

arguments over the meaning and interpretation of pain as they appeared in many

different forms of literature'. As Bending points out, ideas (like pain, like the gentleman

– like 'the book') are not simply 'a given' for those who encountered them, 'but instead

[were] part of a complex and unstable system of signification, manipulable by those

with power, and powerfully inflected by such diverse categories as class, race, gender,

and, in the case of the decadents of the 1890s, desire.'[40]

In their notion that fictional narratives not only reflect contemporary debates

about ideas but also participate in and shape those debates, studies of fictive 'ideas' –

that is, ideas as they inhere in fictional narratives – have an affinity with the

poststructuralist thought of Michel Foucault. In *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault

argues that discourse about an object produces, rather than mirrors, the significance of

its material 'reality': that ideas cannot exist outside of discourse, which taxonomises

materiality by 'grouping and isolating […] concrete contents' into a transitory

coherence. Underpinning Bending's argument about literary representations of bodily

pain is an insistence, similar to Foucault's, upon representation as taxonomic –

expressing 'as though already there' a concept whose meaning has 'no existence except

in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language'.[41]

In speaking of the 'idea of the book', therefore, the title of my study is intended

to suggest the importance of the representation of books to a wider understanding of

literature and culture at the end of the nineteenth century – as well as the importance of

a wider understanding of the period's literature and culture to the comprehension of the

importance of the representation of books in that period. To paraphrase David Trotter's

work on literary and artistic representation of mess, I hope to show not only that

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[40] Lucy Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain in Late Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 1.
[41] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology Of The Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. xxi.

literature is a force to be reckoned with in the proper understanding of books, but that the representation of books is a force to be reckoned with in the proper understanding of literature: in the pleasures it makes possible, in its instructiveness.[42]

Foucault's contention that the significance of objects relies on the discourses that categorise and define those objects in certain ways has affinities with Jerome McGann's conception of a book as a 'socialized' entity.[43] For McGann, the reader-centric 'universe of literature is socially generated and does not exist in a steady state', since each reader will react to a text in a different way.[44] Moreover, since 'literary works typically secure their effects by other than purely linguistic means', the text to which the reader reacts is itself unstable, in that each edition is physically different.[45] In light of this, the reading of texts in general (and literary texts in particular) must be thought of not in terms of the direct communication of an original authorial intention, but as a process of 'continuous socialization' that constitutes the taming of the infinite 'universe of poiesis' attendant on each act of reading – a conjunction unique in its specific material, historical and psychological conditions.[46] In pursuing the question of the cultural position of the book at the end of the nineteenth century, this thesis draws on the fundamental assumption that the literary text is, as McGann proposes, a 'socialized' entity, whose meaning is inseparable from its interpretation, at a given historical moment, by a reader inevitably encountering it in a historically-specific material form.

McGann's idea has affinities with the 'reconceptualization' that John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan propose in their study of early English drama. They hope to

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[42] David Trotter, *Cooking With Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford and NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 9-10.
[43] See Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
[44] Ibid. p. 75.
[45] Ibid. p. 77.
[46] Ibid. pp. 83, 75.

shift 'the emphasis [of theatre studies] from drama as the timeless achievement of sovereign authorship to drama as collective activity that ties the play to history'; for to 'maintain that the text of a play (or *a* text, for texts, too, change over time) is real and performance merely ephemeral is to mistake the effect of a quark for the thing itself'.[47] As an approach to literature, it might be said that book history, as McGann construes it, becomes for the study of the printed text what theatre studies has to the interpretation of dramatic works – a discipline that enhances the meaning of the text by emphasising that the construction or reconstruction of that meaning is grounded in material practices as historically-specific as the discursive practices identified by poststructuralism.

While I draw upon McGann's work in order to conceptualise 'ideas' of the book circulating in the late nineteenth century, I hope to combine the literary treatment of 'ideas' with the book historian's awareness of texts as material 'things'. To this end, I draw on recent work examining the way in which 'ideas' are inescapably bound up with 'things', as well as how this inescapable connection is found (and, indeed, *made*) in the period's literature. In short, I aim to examine literary representations of the book as an example of literature's capacity to expose what Elaine Freedgood has termed the 'ideas in things'.[48]

Freedgood argues that while the Victorian novel 'showers us with things[,] […] the protocols for reading the realist novel have long focused us on subjects and plots; they have implicitly enjoined us *not* to interpret many or most of its objects'.[49] In an attempt to reverse the trend, she presents readings of three literary objects 'with obvious imperial and industrial histories': mahogany furniture in *Jane Eyre* (1847), calico

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[47] John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan, 'Introduction' in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. Cox and Kastan (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 1-5 (4).
[48] Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meanings in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).
[49] Ibid. p. 1.

curtains in *Mary Barton* (1848) and negro-head tobacco in *Great Expectations* (1860-61):

> These objects are largely inconsequential in the rhetorical hierarchy of the text – they do not ascend to metaphorical stature; they suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the subjects who use them. But each of these objects, if we investigate them in their 'objectness,' was highly consequential in the world in which the text was produced.[50]

In practice, this requires the literary critic to take the fictional object literally: to treat the object not as a signifier within the structural framework of the novel's narrative, but as a functioning example of the tangible, quotidian artefact which it so manifestly represents. In *Jane Eyre*, for example, 'understanding the widest possible range of meanings for […] mahogany furniture […] requires that one learn about the history of the depletion of mahogany in Madeira and in the Caribbean (the two major sources of wealth in the novel)'. As with new historicism, it is an exercise that requires the reinsertion of historical detail into a text which is itself a part of that context – with the result that new light is shed not only on the text but on the historical moment that produced it. Taking mahogany literally prevents it from becoming simply 'a weak metonym for wealth and taste' and ensures that 'it figures, first of all, itself'. Only once the nature of what haunts novelistic objects has been established can those objects be 'returned to their novelistic homes, so they can inhabit them with a radiance or

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[50] Ibid. p. 2.

resonance of meaning they have not possessed or have not legitimately possessed in previous literary-critical reading'.[51]

Freedgood's approach might be characterised as a species of new historicism that centres on the historical particularity of physical objects as well as of discursive practices. As Stephen Greenblatt's examination of Renaissance discourses of power within the texts of the period have helped to illuminate both the literary text and the historical document by demonstrating how the two cohere, a 'strong, literalizing metonymy can "start" fictional objects into historical life and historicize our fictions against the grain of the kinds of allegorical meaning we already know how to find, read, and create'.[52] It is, in short, 'a historicist move that is now familiar but was once impossible to perform, given the cloistering canons of humanist or New Criticism'.[53]

Marx's theory of the commodity fetish informs Freedgood's argument, underlining the necessity of literalising the apparently figurative literary object. Marx sees the commodity as a social hieroglyphic requiring interpretation, but this interpretation is hampered by 'commodity fetishism' – in Freedgood's definition, 'the state of consciousness in which things are abstracted by a money value that is at once naturalized *and* obviously symbolic'.[54] The fetishised commodity, as theorised by Marx, is thus a potent reminder of the dual nature of objects (at once figurative and literal): a dualism that has become lost in a critical tradition that disregards the literal nature of represented objects in favour of an approach that regards the fictionalised artefact as a mere metonym. In fact, as Freedgood reminds us, 'a commodity is both a material object and a trope':

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[51] Ibid. p. 3.
[52] Ibid. p. 17.
[53] Ibid. p. 20.
[54] Ibid. p. 26.

> The commodity stands for something that is and is not immediately clear to its beholders, but […] [critics] have imagined commodities such that they are somehow capable of letting us know that we have turned them into figures: we need to literalize them in order to re-figure them, that is we need to re-materialize them in order to understand their value differently, less abstractly.[55]

Thus, an analysis of the literary representations of material cultures cannot be effective if it attempts wholly to sublimate the materiality of the objects represented.

In its emphasis on the significant materiality of objects in fiction, Freedgood's study usefully reconciles the literary critic's concern for the historically-situated *discourses* of fictional narrative with the historically-situated *materialities* that constitute the history of objects. Any study that seeks to examine the representation of books as significant objects in fiction, however, must recognise that, as a 'readable' material artefact, the book is perhaps unique in its 'peculiar status as a material object which [also] carries explicit, decodable symbolic information':

> Although it is true of all material objects recovered by archaeology that they carry a symbolic meaning, however mundane, a text is perhaps unique in conveying a meaning explicitly by means of language. […] [T]he text's unique value lies in its ability to 'speak'.[56]

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[55] Ibid. pp. 27-28.

[56] John Bennet, 'Archaeology and Texts' in *Archaeological Review From Cambridge*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Autumn 1984), 2-3 (2). The implications of this ambiguity between the book as text and the book as object are discussed fully, in this thesis's third chapter, as a context for the representation of books in M.R. James's short fiction.

Book historians would interject that if, as a relic of its historical moment, the text 'speaks', it does so not only by means of its written content, but also via the particular conditions of that content's physical medium which are themselves significant in generating meaning. Yet, the book is almost entirely unique in being a linguistic and a material text at the same time, which renders it problematic.

This has not always been sufficiently recognised when the significance of the physical book is under examination. Walter Benjamin, for example, in his celebrated essay, 'Unpacking My Library' (1931), argues that the collector's relationship with his library is one which largely bypasses the books' 'functional, utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness'. Instead, for the collector, the book represents 'the scene, the stage' on which the drama of its past history unfolds. For them, each individual book absorbs and speaks of the history surrounding it: '[t]he period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership'. It is, indeed, the 'quintessence' of that history. So much so that, although collectors *own* their books, they are really only enlightened keepers, 'the physiognomists of the world of objects[,] […] the interpreters of fate'.[57]

This emphasis upon the book collector as the interpreter of a physical form is understandable, of course, when one considers that one of the essay's aims is to explain how interpreting the individuality of each physical book can be a valid exercise in itself – that the narrative thus 'read' is often as absorbing as that of the written texts they contain and transmit. Indeed, so 'textual' is a book's physicality that the 'non-reading of books' not only fails to detract from the validity of one's status as 'collector', but can also be said to be 'characteristic' of that type.[58] In fact, Benjamin argues, the collector exists in a special relationship to the book as material commodity: the 'purchasing done

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[57] Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 61-9 (62).
[58] Ibid. pp. 63-64.

by a book collector has very little in common with that done in a bookshop by a student getting a textbook, a man of the world buying a present for his lady, or a businessman intending to while away his next train journey'.[59]

Yet, Benjamin's example of the student and the businessman, each of whom wish, first and foremost, to purchase a particular kind of text, emphasises that, for the majority of readers the written text is just as important, as a factor in informing their purchase, as its physical form – if not more so. What this means is that any 'idea' of the book must be seen as a response to a combination of factors concerning not only the particular *physical* status of a given text, but also, as I hope the example of *Tess* makes clear, from the cultural currency of a particular *written* text (or a particular kind of written text, or even 'the book' as a concept) at a given historical moment. Because the 'novels' to which Tess refers are never enumerated, her reference to them clearly refers not to specific works and their specific contents, but only to an 'idea' of those works. The fictional book is an 'idea', anchored in books that are actually available to Hardy's readers (like Moore's novels or, indeed, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* itself), but also recognisably metonymic of contemporary 'ideas' about the 'purity' of young ladies – an issue with which those objects are bound up, not only in Hardy's novel but also in the contemporary debates, which it underscores, about the novel as a textual and a material form.

Gerard Curtis provides an illuminating example of how the book's double significance as both literary text and physical object – physically linked, but conceptually separable – can have consequences for the way in which the book functions as an idea in art. In his work on the book as the subject of artistic representation in the Victorian period, Curtis examines the 'Literature' biscuit tin,

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[59] Ibid. p. 64.

unveiled by Huntley and Palmer in 1901 and taking the shape of a row of books on a

shelf. Curtis draws an analogy between the consumable, ephemeral quality of the

biscuits contained in the tin and the words inscribed on the pages of a printed volume.

He then contrasts the consumable text/biscuit with the tangible, permanent nature of the

physical book: the solid tin that remains long after the biscuit has been consumed. The

analogy leads him to conclude that '[b]ooks to the Victorians, said something in their

physical presence that went beyond their content': 'Text is biscuit, but book is tin and

object: it is the iconoclast's hated reliquary, the fetishized device upon which greater

meaning is conferred than the "word" itself'.[60] The tin represents eight slim volumes

labelled 'History of England', 'Pilgrim's Progress', 'Burns', 'Pickwick Papers',

'Robinson Crusoe', 'Gulliver's Travels', 'Self Help' and 'Shakespeare'. All the books

are the same length – and the fact that the text of Samuel Smiles's *Self Help* (1859) is of

the same thickness as the complete works of Shakespeare indicates, as Curtis suggests,

that the two are not meant to represent the texts of Smiles's work nor of Shakespeare's.

Rather, they are 'empty tins': as commodified embodiments of 'Smiles' and

'Shakespeare', they denote the cultural significance of a text but not the texts

themselves.[61] In symbolic terms, therefore, the book itself already represents the textual

content it offers – or, at least, the textual content it is held to offer a particular audience

within a particular literary-cultural context.

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[60] Gerard Curtis, *Visual Words: Art and the Material Book in Victorian England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 204-205; a photograph of the 'Literature' biscuit tin appears on p. 204.

[61] For a systematic analysis of the ways in which the physical and other extra-textual accoutrements of a book transform the physical book itself into a set of signifiers see, for example, Couturier, *Textual Communication* (especially Chapter 2), Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: CUP, 1997) and Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005). Some of the ways in which the material presentation of particular texts mediates their meanings will be discussed, in this thesis's second chapter, in relation to Robert Louis Stevenson's fiction, but at this stage I am more concerned with the way in which a book can manifest itself as an autonomous idea separate from but related to the text it contains: an idea of which its physical presence, regardless of the variations in presentations that occur between editions, is merely an emblem. I am interested in the ways in which this idea can itself become a commodity.

Curtis's implication is that every book is potentially an 'empty tin', whose physical presence stands in for a certain abstracted idea of its contents, making the physical book available for artistic representation as an icon of what reading promises to facilitate. The collective representation of these works under the banner of 'Literature' renders the books whose spines appear on the tin simultaneously both a reflection of and an implicit comment upon the status of literature in 1901 – or, at least, they portray an idea of the literary book dominant enough for the manufacturer to have recourse to it. The 'Shakespeare' volume, for example, stands in for an actual volume of Shakespeare and the playtexts contained therein, but it also acts as an icon of the contemporary cultural currency of those texts as examples of the highest form of literature – the text itself is physically absent, but it re-presents itself as that which its cultural currency has allowed its physical shell to symbolise. A similar statement could be made about the other books represented on the tin: the appearance of *Self-Help*, for instance, evokes an ethical principle, whilst simultaneously anchoring that principle in a specific text at a specific time. Smiles's work is present only as an abstracted idea of itself – an endorsement of self-help (the doctrine) communicable via the material presence of *Self-Help* (the text).

The representation of the book in fiction has in common with Curtis's biscuit tin the fact that it evokes and makes visible a familiar material object, but only by presenting that object as a representation of itself. For instance, Tess's absent novels can only signify within Hardy's narrative because of their recognisable situation within a wider tradition of books as representational objects, signifying only according to their position within a larger cultural discourse. *Tess*'s evocation of un-named and un-read novels is possible only because of the significance retained by 'the novel' within a wider debate concerning the availability of certain kinds of knowledge to certain kinds

of individuals. It helps shed light on that debate, even as the position of books within such debates helps to illuminate the significance of books in fiction.

The importance of the book as both a physical and a textual object, as well as the way in which both combine to recast the book as an 'idea', can be conveyed by a brief comparison of the way in which books feature in Joseph Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895), and his later *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In both these novels, books become tangible symbols of an 'imperial' idea, which their textual contents fail to bear out. At the end of the former novel, the ruined trader, Almayer, returns to his office for the last time, intending to put the accoutrements of his failed career to the flame. Surveying a collection of old account books, he recalls how he had intended to maintain in them 'day by day a record of his rising fortunes', but that 'for many years there has been no record to keep on the blue and red ruled pages'.[62] The books, especially, speak of the nature of these broken objects as a decaying mask for the flourishing business enterprise they once promised. On the surface, they present a complete set of accounts but a glance inside reveals that these physical books have not fulfilled their promise. They contain nothing but blank 'ruled pages'. Indeed, the fact that the paper is 'ruled' enables the absence of text to evoke not only Almayer's failure successfully to maintain an orderly rule over a trading outpost, but also over his native wife and daughter, both of whom have rebelled spectacularly against his attempts to exert power over them. The absence of text ensures the books' capacity to work as a mask not only for the failure of Almayer's business acumen, but also of the contingencies that render the imperial project one that must be carefully enforced, rather than one which arises unchallenged from the infallibility of Western supremacy: the 'ruled' text is useless unless it is properly maintained.

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[62] Joseph Conrad, *Almayer's Folly* (London: J.M. Dent, 1995), p. 156.

A similar point might be made regarding the more famous example, in *Heart of Darkness*, of Kurtz's report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, in which the persuasive power of 'eloquence – of words – of burning noble words' is belied by the scrawl at the foot of the page:

It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'[63]

Despite the eloquent mask of altruistic discourse, the startling shift from a moving plea for education to a bluntly stated desire to exterminate illustrates the unsuccessful suppression of the apparently civilized Kurtz's own 'Savage Customs' in the face of humanity's perennial 'proximity to a great human passion' forever waiting to be 'let loose' (*Heart of Darkness*, 73). Ultimately, the badge of eloquence masks the proximity of Kurtz's own mission to the 'savagery' it ostensibly resists, laying bare the uncomfortable notion that the suppression of savage customs can just as easily translate to a frenzied cry for the enforced physical erasure of those who practise them. An impulse to silence, to stamp out, which underlies both the eloquent appeal and the violent physical action of the imperial project, is used here to link the two.

Almayer and Kurtz's books both serve, in their own ways, to reveal the uncomfortable ambiguities and vulnerabilities that lie masked behind the façade not just of behaviour, but of the myth of imperial dominance – not only its ability, but also its intrinsic right, to perpetuate itself. In Almayer's case, the physical books mask the absence of the imperial success which their installation (along with the office

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[63] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 83-84. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

containing them) was designed to govern. In Kurtz's case, on the other hand, it is the eloquence demanded of the form in which he writes that serves to mask the savagery behind the brutal project it implements. Both passages involve the use of written texts as a means of sweeping inconvenient truths beneath the carpet by buying into the ideas which the books prop up. In both cases, that 'idea' relies on the ability of certain material and literary forms (the office ledger, the societal report) to signify within the imperial culture in which they circulate. In exposing the inadequacies of form and content, both in their literary and their material dimensions, Conrad's novels expose as contingent the success of the imperial 'idea', which these texts have evolved to support: an idea of the book which depends on its textual contents but which, like Curtis's empty tin, continues to flourish even when that text has been undermined, or even eaten away completely.

In this way, books are not only legible objects, but objects which, in their legibility, can be deployed in order to make a point *about* the legibility of objects – a legibility that links tangible physical things with historically contingent texts. For objects, or even people, to be compared to a book is to have their legibility simultaneously foregrounded and interrogated. In considering the 'ideas' that accrue to the fictional book, it is necessary to recognise the book as an object that speaks constantly of its duality as a 'thing' at once physical and textual – an object whose physical status is not just significant in itself, but also speaks of the symbolic weight which the 'idea' of a particular kind of written text carries, or can be made to carry, under specific historical circumstances. This 'idea' of the book – the way in which it is not only produced by, but also actively discussed *within* the period's fiction – is something I will discuss in relation to a wide range of late-nineteenth-century fictional narratives.

iii. Moral Furniture: books at the *fin de siècle*

The examples of Conrad and Hardy demonstrate some of the ways in which, at the end of the nineteenth century, concerns about the changing condition of the book – its form, its function, its readers, its writers – intensified and become inextricably bound up with other characteristic *fin de siècle* concerns: the emergence of a new, literate, lower-middle-class workforce; the rise of the New Woman; fears about human degeneration and the contingencies of progress, especially in an imperial context. Anxieties about the book join a plethora of isolated topical concerns which, together, were also taken as alarming symptoms of a wider fragmentation of the traditional social order – seismic cracks in social and national identity that led to fears about the kind of chaos that might arise from their destruction.[64] As Holbrook Jackson argues in his account of the 1890s, the period is especially interesting not because it *is* 'a "period of transition"', but because its denizens so self-consciously *present* themselves as the products of a transitory age, 'convinced that they were passing not only from one social system to another, but from one morality to another, and from one religion to a dozen more.'[65] In such a context, the circumstances of literary production can be read as one more indicator of a deeply felt shift in the nature of socio-political life.

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[64] For *fin de siècle* concerns in a book history context, see Keating, *The Haunted Study* and Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition, 1850-1910: Studies in Media and Book History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). On gender and the book, see Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader* and Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 5; for the book in relation to the London poor see Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977); on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century concerns about the aesthetic and social value of the book in a newly popularised marketplace see the first chapter of John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992).

[65] Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), pp. 27-8. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text. For a comprehensive account of the period as one that perceived itself as an age of transition, see Keating, Chapter 2.

Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892; English edition, 1895) exemplifies, in its most exaggerated form, the kind of all-encompassing fear of annihilation that could arise from a perception of the Western world as one in which society, in any recognisable manifestation, faced impending dissolution. Nordau announces an imminent 'Dusk of the Nations […] in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world.'[66] Against this apocalyptic backdrop, Nordau outlines several 'case studies', which he identifies as typically *fin de siècle* – a diagnostic term for those individuals and groups characterised by 'a contempt for traditional views of custom and morality… a practical emancipation from traditional discipline, which theoretically is still in force' (Nordau, 5).

Nordau exemplifies the *fin de siècle* at its most pessimistic and hysterical, his insistent sense of an ending unwittingly (and ironically) placing his own work as one of the most exemplary amongst the pathological paranoia it seeks to denounce. Yet, as Peter Keating points out, this pervasive 'questioning of fundamental beliefs', so characteristic of the period, could also take on 'an air of denigration and mockery, a determination to reject mid-Victorian values and take a chance on what comes next.'[67] So it was for Jackson, who felt that this 'was a time when people went about frankly and cheerfully endeavouring to solve the question "How to Live."' Nordau was only one side of the *fin de siècle* coin: 'those who lived through the nineties as young men and women will remember that this search for a new mode of life was anything but melancholy or diseased' (Jackson, 26).

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[66] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 2. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.
[67] Keating, p. 98.

Taken together, Nordau and Jackson's conflicting interpretations – the one a prophecy of doom, the other a retrospective account of optimistic questing – are linked by a shared perception of the era as one characterised by the fragmentation of a previously coherent system of values and beliefs, as well as by excited anticipation about what might replace them. In this sense, what is '*fin de siècle*' about *fin de siècle* debates is not their tendency to define and defend institutions perceived to be on the wane, nor simply a distrust of the new. Rather, it is a tendency to speculate about what lies beyond the *status quo* whose dissolution seems certain – an inevitable ringing out of the old mirrored by a corresponding uncertainty about what (if anything) will emerge to replace it. Nordau fears chaos, whilst Jackson recalls an excited search for 'a new mode of life' – but both are equally insistent that 'one set of institutions and creations' will soon be replaced by an entirely new one, whose nature is as yet unclear.

Edmund Gosse's 'The Influence of Democracy on Literature' (1894) illustrates the way in which discussions of the literary system in the period were, in this sense, typically '*fin de siècle*'. Discussing the libraries' monopoly over the novel's form and content, Gosse describes 'the disease which we might call Mudieitis, the inflammation produced by the fear that what you are inspired to say, and know you ought to say, will be unpalatable to the circulating libraries' – a condition that holds the author in check, forcing his fiction into a particular form. For Gosse, as for Moore, Mudieitis has its roots not only in the prudish whims of the librarians themselves, but also in their readiness to bow down to the demands of their subscribers – particularly '"the wife of a country incumbent," that terror before which Messrs. Smith fall prone upon their faces'.[68]

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[68] Quoted in Brake, p. 22; for a fictional example of 'Mudieitis' in practice, see the plight of Edward Reardon in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), who struggles to balance his unprofitable literary aspirations with the arduous, but lucrative, task of mechanistically producing a three-volume novel.

Laurel Brake uses the passage as proof of Gosse's '*fin de siècle* disillusion with the libraries – in that selectiveness amounts to censorship'. What makes the problem particularly *fin de siècle*, however, is not the fact of censorship itself – hardly a new phenomenon – but the way in which Gosse sees censorship as an instance 'of the direct influence of democracy upon literature, and that of a deleterious kind'.[69] Gosse's outburst is typically *fin de siècle* because of the way in which it places a conflict about the prevailing literary system at the heart of an increasingly democratic print culture, in order to establish the obsolescence of the system that currently governs that culture. In the year that the circulating library's monopoly on the novel ended, Gosse, in Nordau's terminology, presents the circulating library as propping up a literary system whose 'institutions and creations' now resemble the accoutrements of a dying world. He demonstrates precisely the 'contempt for traditional views of custom and morality' that Nordau fears, and advocates a 'practical emancipation from traditional discipline, which theoretically is still in force.'

That Gosse considered the circulating library obsolete by 1894 is hardly surprising given the various social and economic factors that would soon spell the end of its reign, as well as the dominance of the triple-decker form, which it had upheld. Technological improvements in printing techniques and the disbanding of the 'taxes on knowledge' meant that the second half of the nineteenth century saw the production of cheap printed material becoming both increasingly practical and more economically viable. This led to a flood of new books and periodicals – itself arising to meet the increasing demand created by the advent of the first generation to benefit from the free, compulsory education provided by the Education Acts of 1870, 1880 and 1891.[70] The

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[69] Brake, p. 22.
[70] A full summary of these Acts can be found at http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/1870educationact/ [Accessed: 27th March

result was a massive expansion not only in the amount of printed material available, but also the kinds of markets that print culture could now reach.

The rise in literacy rates was dramatic. The 1851 census recorded literacy figures of only 67 percent for men and 51 percent for women, but this had increased to 97.2 percent for men and 96.8 percent for women by 1900.[71] Admittedly, there is still some debate regarding the extent to which such figures can be taken as reliable indicators of literacy in the period – as well as the extent to which the Education Acts were implemented, and to what effect.[72] Even so, the vast increase in printed material aimed at all levels of reading abilities would seem to suggest the presence of a similarly increasing mass of literary consumers. Simon Eliot, in his statistical study of literary production in the nineteenth century, provides an idea of the scale of the increase in book production: 'by 1899 books had doubled their annual number of recorded titles in twenty-five years, whereas paper production had increased seven-fold in the same period'.[73] Richard Altick has also noted that although there remains no concrete reason to suppose that the Education Acts led directly to a sharp increase in reading ability, they performed important work in maintaining a steady rise in literacy that had been in

2012]. The initial Act brought into being a series of School Boards in England and Wales to establish elementary schools in areas where they were needed and to govern existing schools (a similar arrangement was introduced in Scotland in 1872). The 1880 Act made attendance compulsory for children between 5 and 10 years of age; further Acts, in 1893 and 1899, extended the compulsory attendance age to 11 and then 12. In 1891, school fees were abolished for 'Board' schools. Although attendance was only theoretically compulsory (in the early 1890s, attendance for children between 5 and 10 'fell short at 82 percent') this constitutes an unprecedented narrative of increasingly available education.

[71] See Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and its Readers', p. 19.

[72] As Flint notes, 'there exists, despite the statistics, plenty of discursive evidence throughout the century which laments the faltering quality of reading, and the tendency for the faculty to decay once someone has left school' (Flint, 'Victorian Novel', p. 19). In addition, most of these figures derive from the ability of newlywed couples to sign their names on the marriage register – hardly a comprehensive display of literary ability. For the advantages and disadvantages of the marriage registers as a source of information on adult literacy, see David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 17.

[73] Simon Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing 1800-1919* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1994), p. 13.

progress throughout the century, ensuring that basic literacy continued to increase, despite a constantly expanding population.[74]

Not only did the amount of new publications increase, but the variety of readerships who consumed them led to a corresponding increase in the variety of forms and styles adopted by writers as new works were tailored to suit the increasingly diverse demands of an expanding market. As well as the moral question of who should be allowed to read which books under what circumstances, concerns were also raised regarding the extent to which an increase in the quantity of reading material meant an inevitable decrease in quality as writers struggled to produce enough material to meet demand. In George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), the increasing dominance of market forces on literature traps the idealistic novelist Edwin Reardon in a series of artistic compromises, but furnishes his friend, the pragmatic hack Jasper Milvain, with a series of lucrative (if aesthetically dubious) opportunities. Through these parallel careers, Gissing illustrates fictively the tensions faced by writers in an expanded marketplace where the demand for printed material made authorship a viable profession only if authors were willing and able to compromise their art in order to produce what the market demanded: material of questionable merit written to suit the abilities and desires of the 'quarter-educated' products of Forster's board schools.[75]

Gissing's novel, with its pessimistic view of a super-democratised, hyper-productive literary system, is indicative of the way in which, whatever the true extent of literacy in the period, a perceived extension in the numbers and kinds of reading experiences available (not to mention the numbers and kinds of people *to whom* they were available) was a source of anxiety at the time. Whatever the historical reality, the

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[74] See Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 2nd Edition (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), pp. 171-72.
[75] For a full discussion of the historical-material context of Gissing's novel, see Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 105-56.

growth in print culture had an imaginative currency in the late nineteenth century and was frequently the topic of intense debate and commentary. Thomas Wright, for example, was in no doubt not only of the very real effects of Forster's act, but also of its insidious nature:

> The extension of elementary education […] if left to its single self, will give us a larger number of the people able to read the police intelligence of the lower types of weekly newspapers, and willing to read little else.[76]

Wright's fears echo Nordau's premonitions of inexorable decline: without an intermediary to enforce an objective control on literary quality, the marketplace will be saturated with trash, produced for the benefit of a new, barely literate public unable and unwilling to cope with anything more taxing. Joseph Ackland's 'Elementary Education and the Decay of Literature' (1894), continued in the same vain. As Mary Hammond explains, both are symptomatic of a period in which the dominant view was that 'compulsory elementary education fitted the populace only to purchase and swallow whatever literature was thrown at them, rather than to discern the good from the bad'.[77] Higher literacy rates meant that print in general was becoming an increasingly viable commodity, but it also meant that the production, distribution and consumption of printed material was becoming increasingly democratised. Clearly, such mass-consumption could not 'be left to its single self' if any notion of books as vehicles of objective moral and aesthetic value was to survive.

The 'problem' of the book in the period is comparable to a theory about the status of mass-produced objects offered by Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*

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[76] Thomas Wright, 'On a Possible Popular Culture' (1881), quoted in Hammond, p. 8.
[77] Hammond, p. 8.

(1968). Baudrillard suggests that when technological developments allow the production of many copies of the same object on a grand scale, the resultant object is 'liberated in its function'. For example, he argues that 'serially-produced' furniture, precisely in being more widely available, has lost the 'expressive power of the old symbolic order'.[78] This rejection of distinctive designs in favour of a uniform functionality has the effect of ensuring that the object is more easily mobile and more adaptable to personal space. The individual is no longer defined through their possessions and is totally in control of how their use is to be conceived:

> The[ir] function is no longer obscured by the moral theatricality of the old furniture; it is emancipated now from ritual, from ceremonial, from the entire ideology which used to make our surroundings into an opaque mirror of a reified human structure.[79]

To sweep away the old forms is to sweep away the stagnant ideologies linked to those forms and the practices associated with them. At the end of the nineteenth century, the book was one such object, which enabled the morals and values of its readers to be policed and upheld through a careful control of the practices associated with its production, distribution and consumption. As such safeguards began to break down, commentators like Wright demanded that new ones be instated – that reading should not be allowed to continue unchecked. The debate surrounding the triple-decker and the effect of its formal and moral constraints not only upon those who did read but also on those who, like Tess, conspicuously did not, was thus exacerbated at the end of the nineteenth century by developments in the ways in which fiction was produced, how it

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[78] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 2005), p. 15.
[79] Ibid. p. 16.

was consumed and by whom. The effect of this on the novel has already been discussed at length, but an example of the book (a physical commodity of which the novel is only one manifestation) as the furniture of a dominant morality can be found in *Vanity Fair* (1847-48).

In Thackeray's novel, George Osborne senior is accustomed to retire after dinner to 'the usual apartment which went in his house by the name of the study; and was sacred to the master of the house'. From this sacred den, Osborne runs the house. Here wages are paid, allowances distributed and discipline meted out when required. It is the seat of paternal command, the centre of power from whence the institution of Victorian patriarchy is maintained. Behind the seat of power (quite literally) lies a 'couple of glazed bookcases, containing standard works in stout gilt bindings':

> The *Annual Register*, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Blair's *Sermons*, and Hume and Smollett. From year's end to year's end he never took one of these volumes from the shelf; but there was no member of the family that would dare for his life to touch one of these books, except upon those rare Sunday evenings when there was no dinner party and when the great scarlet Bible and Prayer-book were taken out from the corner where they stood beside his copy of the *Peerage*, and the servants being rung up to the dining parlour, Osborne read the evening service to his family in a loud grating pompous voice.[80]

The extract illustrates the way in which books, as objects, could operate as props in a 'moral theatricality', maintaining the moral order by being so crucial a part of the theatricality through which it operates. Osborne's books are furniture. Not to be used,

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[80] W.M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (OUP, 1983), p. 281. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

they are physical symbols of authority. On the only occasion when they are read, they are used as apparatus in the supplanting of one ritual (the evening meal) with another (the weekly sermon): props in a socialised rite combining the institutional power of both the patriarch and the church.

Nor is this the only occasion in the novel when books are equated with a social function. Of Lady Jane Briggs we are told that her mother 'ordered her dresses, her books, her bonnets, and her ideas for her' (Thackeray, 412). This notion of print as vehicles of knowledge, access to which could be carefully controlled, is also reflected in Mrs Briggs's obsessive distribution of religious tracts as a species of medicine for the soul. Although savagely satirised by Thackeray, this evangelical zeal for the propagation of specific kinds of beneficial knowledge, and the use of books and reading as the props that govern family rituals reflects a world in which printed materials exist to control not only access to knowledge, but also to ensure the survival of the socio-political institutions that carefully control its creation and distribution.

In his seminal study of the growth of the reading public in the nineteenth century, Altick bears out this conceptual link between books and knowledge, as well as its socio-political consequences. Tracing the link to the predominance, in the first half of the century, of evangelical and utilitarian ideas of education, Altick argues that both movements worked towards the expansion of literacy because each 'had its special brand of Truth to disseminate through print'.[81] While evangelicals aimed 'to point the way to the kingdom of God', utilitarians worked 'to insure the greater glory of the workshop of the world'.[82] For both groups, however, reading was an essential form of education only insofar as it remained fundamentally an improving activity, facilitating the dissemination of specific knowledge for specific ends. Recalling the empirical

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[81] Altick, p. 131.
[82] Ibid. p. 132.

preoccupations of Dickens's Gradgrind, Altick notes the utilitarian notion of reading as primarily the means by which could be disseminated 'the good, solid, employable facts of mechanics and chemistry, metallurgy and hydraulics – facts that could be applied in the workshop and on the railway line, to produce goods more cheaply and efficiently, to communicate and transport more swiftly'.[83]

So widespread was the association of books with the accumulation of knowledge that, in 1867, the educationalist W.B. Hodgson felt compelled to speak out against the 'radical fallacy' of 'supposing that no knowledge or improvement is obtainable except from books'. For Hodgson, this had led to an overemphasis on literacy in education, due to 'a confounding of means with ends'. In fact, he argued, reading and writing 'are no more knowledge or education […] than a knife, fork and plate constitute a dinner'.[84] On the other hand, David Vincent has described the way in which newly literate working class readers' first encounter with 'book knowledge' often resembled 'a secularised conversion experience'.[85] Vincent's examples, together with the steady rise of literacy throughout the nineteenth century, show that the idea of literacy as a key allowing access to the knowledge locked inside books was highly valued, not only by officials concerned with the expansion and regulation of elementary education, but also by those working-class readers to whom access to book knowledge represented a valuable opportunity to 'better themselves'.

What *Vanity Fair* demonstrates is that, while the evangelical trope that linked books with the ability to accumulate knowledge may have had a beneficial effect upon those newly-literate individuals who suddenly gained access to such a treasure-house, it

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[83] Ibid. p. 131.

[84] W.B. Hodgson, 'Exaggerated Estimates of Reading and Writing', *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science* (1867), quoted in Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p. 7.

[85] Ibid.

was precisely the idea that books *already* reflected the nature of the world, stentoriously and implacably bound in gilt covers on the gentleman's shelf or read aloud from the pulpit, that also allowed books to work as the social apparatus they become in the hands of Mr Osborne and Mrs Briggs. If reading allowed working-class people to 'better' themselves via the accumulation of knowledge about the world, then careful surveillance could also ensure that the *nature* of the world to which it granted access could be rigorously controlled – precisely *because* books were held to reflect the world as straightforwardly as a mirror reflects a room.

The ease (one might almost say the complacency) with which John Ruskin is able to offer a definition of a 'true book' is a case in point. Distinguishing between 'the books of the hour, and the books of all time', Ruskin shares with later commentators the perception that the ephemeral 'books of the hour' are the 'peculiar possession' of an age in which 'education becomes more general'.[86] Such a point is also made in Gissing's *New Grub Street*, where Milvain's devotion to churning out ephemera for consumption by the 'quarter-educated' readers of the new journalism is in stark contrast to Reardon's devotion to the great novel of permanent worth, which he strives to write, only to be constantly foiled by the need to raise money by turning to lesser literary pursuits. In Gissing's novel, the books of the hour threaten the author's ability to produce books for all time. In Ruskin, however, there is little anxiety attached to the existence of such books – and the differentiation is not, primarily, one of intrinsic merit. Rather, the distinction is one of lasting value. Light reading has its place, but we make the worst possible use of it if we allow it 'to usurp the place of the true book' (Ruskin, 31).

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[86] John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) in *Sesame and Lilies & The Ethics of the Dust* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), pp. 30, 31. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

Ruskin's ability to find unproblematic the increasing number of new printed materials resulting from the spread of education rests, however, on an ability to delineate without much difficulty a 'true book' to which these ephemera are the harmless counterpart. For books of the hour 'are not books at all, merely letters or newspapers in good print'. Conversely, 'true' books offer a perspective on truths that transcend the historical moment of the writing in which it is expressed, a book being 'essentially not a talked thing, but a written thing; and written, not with a view of mere communication, but of permanence': 'The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful. […] He would fain set it down for ever; engrave it on rock, if he could; saying, "This is the best of me["]' (Ruskin, 31-2). Books for all time are 'true' books because not only will they always *remain* true, but that truth will always be legible to those educated enough to be able to get at the author's meaning, rather than simply imposing theirs in its place (Ruskin, 35). Subjectivity is banished from a reading act that is likened to the excavation of metal ore from a rock: 'the metal you are in search of being the author's mind or meaning, the words are as the rock which you have to crush and smelt in order to get at it' (Ruskin, 36). In Ruskin's formulation, right reading is not interpretation but recognition because textual meaning is intrinsic, permanent, durable and detectable – even at the level of language itself, since words retain 'a deep vital meaning, which all good scholars feel in employing them' (Ruskin, 41).

Ruskin's idea of the 'true book' as one that preserves unfluctuating verities, accessible to anyone with the right training, is a concept echoed in Matthew Arnold's dictum that criticism embodies an attempt to 'see the object as in itself it really is'.[87]

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[87] Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', *Essays in Criticism: First and Second Series* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1964), p. 9. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

This is the central tenet of Arnold's 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864). In the same essay, he argues that the poet 'ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry', but finds that the best way to go about such a task is to 'read more books' (Arnold, 12-13). For Arnold, as for Ruskin, reading is the key to the most useful knowledge and to the best and most durable human values. The idea that the best books reflect truths that are directly apprehendable in life empowers that statement: they are able confidently to assert the best books' ability to enshrine the best values precisely because of a naïve belief that the 'best' values are as directly apprehendable in life as they are in the best books.

The evangelical zeal displayed by *Vanity Fair*'s Mrs Briggs can be traced back to sixteenth-century Protestant reformers who placed such importance on a personal understanding of religion through an ability to read the Bible for oneself. As John Feather points out, however, 'it was not until the creation of the industrial cities brought together a potentially dangerous mass of illiterates that the middle classes responded with their full force to the need to educate the poor'.[88] Cheap Repository Tracts started being published under Hannah More's stewardship of the Religious Tract Society during the Revolutionary period, and 'were sold largely to the middle classes who gave them to the poor'.[89] There was also a secular dimension to these educational initiatives. 1827 saw the founding, by Henry Brougham, of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, which produced the *Library of Useful Knowledge* in fortnightly parts at 6d each. Charles Knight was its editor and he also began producing, from 1829, a *Library of Entertaining Knowledge*. The names of these dual initiatives are telling, enacting as they do a taxonomisation of texts as either 'entertaining' or 'useful'.

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[88] Feather, p. 161.
[89] Ibid. p. 162.

The sheer quantity of books and potential readers at the end of the century, however, and the variety of forms which reading took, ensured that the optimism that sometimes attached itself to the spread of literacy had become severely strained by the end of the Victorian period. In his preface to the 1882 edition of *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin wrote: 'it much matters that the young reader of the following essays should be confirmed in the assurance […] that there *is* such a thing as essential good, and as essential evil, in books, in art, and in character; that this essential goodness and badness are independent of epochs, fashions, opinions, or revolutions' (Ruskin, 10). Such an emphatic reiteration of the assumptions underlying *Sesame and Lilies* was necessary, because the idea of 'essential good' and 'essential evil' – or, at least, the triumph of the former over the latter – seemed, by the later nineteenth century, to be everywhere challenged, not least upon the very site that Ruskin had put forward as the ultimate bastion for their continual rediscovery: the book.

Of course, at the end of the century, we still find even the most radical writers upholding the conjunction between books and a totalising knowledge about the world, even when they offer challenges to other aspects of social life. Indeed, the conjunction between books and knowledge in the late nineteenth century is so widespread that to list the various appearances and variations of the paradigm as it is reflected in fiction would, in itself, fill several volumes. *Tess* is one obvious example of how the idea of the book as a knowledge-giving tool is reflected in fiction. The role played by books in imagined future societies is another. In William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890), for example, it is through an avid reading of its literature that the denizens of a future socialist utopia gain knowledge of the nineteenth century and its affairs. The narrator's companion, Dick, is able to conduct a discussion with the Victorian narrator on the long-since defunct institution of the prison as it existed in the 1800s because, he

explains, 'there are good books on that period […] some of which I have read'. The narrator complains that it is unfair of Dick to chastise the Victorians for tolerating the cruel conditions endured by prisoners because 'perhaps […] they did not know what the prisons were like'. His companion retorts that such ignorance is no excuse; after all, he argues, 'you and I know it all these years afterwards'.[90]

H.G. Wells's Time Traveller makes the same point in a rather more pessimistic manner when he discovers a ruined museum at the heart of a similarly ruined future civilization. Previously, he has suspected the temporally distant land to which he has journeyed to contain only the savage Morlocks and the degenerate Eloi on whom they feast. Given the 'intellectual degradation' of these creatures, he is surprised when an investigation of an enormous palace of green porcelain reveals the edifice to be 'the ruins of some latter-day South Kensington'.[91] Realising that the fossil collection he has been examining is merely a small part of an even greater display of accumulated artefacts, he speculates excitedly: 'this palace of Green Porcelain had a great deal more in it than a Gallery of Palaeontology; possibly historical galleries; it might be, even a library!' (Wells, *Time Machine*, 68) The Time Traveller's thrill at the possibility of a library echoes Morris's (not unreasonable) point about the ability of future societies to learn about past societies by reading the books they wrote about themselves. By finding a future library, the Time Traveller might learn something of the events that have led to the world becoming the arid wasteland it now is. At the same time, the dilapidated state of the building, a ruined repository of knowledge at the heart of world of 'intellectual degradation' is a dramatic portrayal of what happens when humanity ceases to read. As with Tess, so with mankind: the absence of books is the absence of knowledge, and the

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[90] William Morris, *News From Nowhere* in *News From Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 41-228 (79).
[91] H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: J.M. Dent, 2002), p. 66, 87. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

result of that absence is potential degradation. Moreover, the reverse is also implied: not only that books contain an essential core of 'knowledge' to which reading gives access, but also that the accumulation of knowledge is, on its own, essentially progressive.

As Feather points out, once acquired, 'the use of literacy could not be controlled' and mass-education began to seem, in some quarters, less attractive in practice than, earlier in the century, it had done in theory.[92] John Feather points out that the Religious Tract Society, for example, had

> demonstrated the existence of a vast potential market, and of the financial rewards to be reaped from it. The lesson was not lost on publishers whose interests were far from the high-flown moral principles of [Hannah] More.[93]

The problem, however, is not the act of reading itself. Even those who, like Wright and Gissing, worried about the detrimental effect of an ill-educated mass-readership upon the quality of literature – and, conversely, the effect of low-quality literature upon the ill-educated mass-readership – only attack the *quality* of the education and the literature. Very rarely does one encounter a suggestion that education is *in itself* a bad thing – rather, the debate concerns itself with the nature and extent of that education. After all, an exponential increase in book production and the emergence of new readerships, as well as the accompanying concerns, were not new phenomena – they had already been a feature of the literary landscape since the mid-eighteenth century. As David Vincent explains, the 'transformation in the availability of the printed word',

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[92] Feather, p. 162.
[93] Ibid. p. 168.

which began during the later decades of the eighteenth century, 'owed more to a revolution in demand than supply':

> By the 1790s, the publication of new book titles was running at four times the level of the beginning of the century, and during the first half of the nineteenth century it was to increase by a further 600 per cent to reach 2,500 a year by 1853[...][94]

Moreover, concerns about the nature of the novel form, such as those I have illustrated with reference to *Tess*, were as old as the novel itself. Indeed, almost exactly the same concerns about how candid fiction should be when addressing women and young people are to be found in Samuel Johnson's discussion of realism in the novel, which appeared in *The Rambler* more than a century before.[95] More recently, at mid-century, Hardy's own point about the very real benefits that candid fiction might have for the purity of female readers finds a pre-echo in Anne Brontë's preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848).[96] Other debates about the moral and aesthetic merits of certain fictional forms and genres throughout the century have also been well documented.[97]

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[94] Vincent, p. 11.

[95] Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, No. 4, 31st March 1750 [The New Realistic Novel] in *Samuel Johnson: The Major Works*, ed. Donald Greene (OUP, 2000), pp. 175-79. For a full discussion of concerns about books and reading in an eighteenth-century context, see Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain*. Space does not permit an extensive comparative study, but for an 'idea of the book' in the late eighteenth century, as well as the first half of the nineteenth, see the essays in *Bookish Histories: Book, Literature and Commercial Modernity, 1700-1900*, ed. Ina Ferris and Paul Keen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Despite the title, the books' essays cover issues governing print culture comprehensively only to the mid-Victorian period.

[96] Defending the novel's candour in her preface to its second edition, Brontë, prefiguring Tess's outburst, writes: 'O Reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts […] there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience.' (Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [London: Penguin, 1996], p. 4).

[97] The debate, in the 1860s, regarding the sensation novel, is a case in point. See Wynne, *Sensation Fiction*.

Nevertheless, as Mary Hammond has noted, the last two decades of the century marked a new zenith in debates about the impact of the material form of the book, as well as the conditions in which it was read and by whom, as new printing techniques enabled 'the rapid production of millions of copies in a variety of formats to suit almost every pocket'. But printing was just one part of a network of new technologies that combined to create new conditions, not only of book-production, but also of consumption:

> New networks of communications (including newspapers and periodicals) ensured that potential customers knew about the work in advance and were able to discuss it afterwards. New social spaces enabled purchasers to read, and be seen to read, their new acquisitions. New markets opened up, encouraging the spread of new forms of literature.[98]

The net result, it appeared to many, was unfettered, chaotic competition on an unprecedented scale.

Thackeray's Mr Osborne uses his books, like a latter-day Prospero, to control his own environment ritually by making both the physical and textual book so much a part of his household's socio-political furniture. Eighty years later, an increasingly democratic print culture meant an exponentially larger number of printed books were available as objects through which a correspondingly broad array of readers could not only read about, but also announce their allegiance to, a correspondingly vast firmament of socio-political causes and ideas. The evangelical past, the mass-educated present and the imagined future of *News From Nowhere* are linked by a shared

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[98] Hammond, p. 9.

assumption that in books lie the key to education and improvement. But if books were still linked with knowledge, the 'truth' that Ruskin had no difficulty in attributing to them had become dangerously eroded in a world where, as Hammond puts it, '[w]hat a given book "meant" in culture […] had new definitions, sometimes many of them, and sometimes simultaneously'.[99]

An increased readership meant an increasing proliferation of forms, styles and genres all of which combined to transform any idea of the book as the harbinger of social, religious or political 'truth' into a bewildering array of conflicting *truths*, reflecting a similarly bewildering array of readers. But, as the example of Tess implies, it was not just the effect of this readership on the nature of the book that proved controversial in such an atmosphere, but the effect of the book's increasingly protean form upon a similarly protean mass-readership – a readership that stood as both the cause and the symptom of the book's increasingly diverse nature. Hammond finds, for example, 'an intimate relationship between the ways and the formats in which a given work reached its reader, and the way that reader was constructed – or self-constructed – socially and psychologically':

> By the 1890s we frequently see a construction that figures the modern human as some sort of hybrid, a 'child of the newspapers', the spawn of the unnatural mating of man and mass-produced literature.[100]

This metaphor of hybridity becomes all the more troubling in the case of the debate surrounding the 'corrupting' effect of fictional candour on young women, in which the imagined loss of purity projected onto young readers by concerned librarians, parents

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[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid. p. 10.

and critics constructs the reading experience itself as tantamount to rape in its ability to bring about an unlooked for sexual experience – and, incidentally, implies a troubling capacity on the part of the debate's participants to equate rape with 'sexual corruption'.

If debates such as the one surrounding reading and female 'purity' indicates a perception that literature is construed as 'carrying the sometimes exploitative, incalculable and runaway, but sometimes sweepingly beneficial effects of modernity into the reading subject', then such a transference is the result not only of the text itself but also of 'the new places and the new ways in which it is being read'.[101] Literature was consumed 'on trains and buses and in the city streets' as well as privately at home:

> Literature was in the public domain in myriad new ways and myriad new places. Each of these – precisely because of the social fluidity that it potentially enabled – was discussed, worried over, legislated and catered for in a unique manner and at a unique rate, and that meant the cultural meanings attached to each of these reading venues were very different.[102]

Baudrillard's question regarding the difficulties of categorising everyday objects when mass-production exponentially increases the use, presence and availability of those objects for an ever-increasing number of different people is, therefore, one which late-Victorian commentators on the book were also asking themselves: 'How can we hope to classify a world of objects that changes before our eyes and arrive at an adequate system of description?'[103]

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Baudrillard, p. 1.

As Hammond has implied, the 'moral theatricality' of the old institutions had been replaced with an array of new opportunities for self-expression in an increasingly fragmented modernity. This is as true for the book in the period as it is for gender roles, the health of the empire and, in aesthetics, the artistic integrity of new literary forms and genres in which these concerns were dramatised and explored. If, for Ruskin, the erosion of the 'true' book at the *fin de siècle* meant that the end of the century heralded *fin du livre,* it is a measure of that era's concern for the book that Wells was able to provide an example of *fin du livre* in action as a symptom of a catastrophic *fin du globe*.

In an era characterised by anxieties about fragmenting cultural institutions, it would be foolish to posit one over-arching 'idea' of the book emerging coherently from the disparate works of such a diverse array of authors. What connects the authors discussed in this thesis (Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, M.R. James and E.M. Forster) is a preoccupation with the relationship between world and word – the ability of the written word to refract ideas and experiences it purports accurately to reflect. In fact, Wilde, Stevenson, James and Forster are linked by precisely the way in which their works *reject* one idea of 'the book' in favour of a more subjective collection of intertexts and personal inflections, which becomes, in their work, precisely what characterises reading as an experience. Books become the site, in their fiction, not of a Ruskinian 'excavation' of meaning, but a dialogic encounter in which the concerns of the individual reading subject always inflect the meanings they only allegedly 'excavate'.

The first chapter examines Oscar Wilde's anxious consideration of the damaging effects that obtain when texts are viewed as transparent expressions of truths by and about their authors. For Wilde, such a tendency is prevalent in the treatment of Keats's letters by biographers and those who purchase the dead writer's love letters.

Suggesting that contemporary reviews of his posthumous *De Profundis* (1905) proved such fears to be well founded, I argue that Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) foreshadows these responses in its presentation of a ridiculous and alarming world in which books serve as instruments with which individual subjects can be robbed of their autonomy. I provide a Foucauldian reading of the play, and argue that, within the narrative of the play, notebooks, novels and reference works have a panoptic effect, enshrining the parameters for an examination to which the play's older characters constantly and forcibly submit the younger protagonists. Having examined the consequences of such a reading for the situation of the book within Wilde's aesthetic and political writings, however, I argue that the play ultimately coheres with the radical ethos of Wilde's essays. Both suggest that the individual can bypass the book's panoptic surveillance by viewing identity itself as a self-authored text, rather than as an already-socialised essence. *Earnest* dramatises such an idea, establishing a dichotomy between the literal swapping of one character for a three-volume novel and another character's determination to believe in the validity of her own self-authored (and entirely fictional) diary. This dichotomy establishes identity as a fiction, differentiating not between the real and the imaginary, but between self-authored identities and those which society inscribes upon its subjects. I end by comparing Wilde's play with Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors* (1903), arguing that both share an affinity in championing the imbrication of art and the self as a method of retaining personal autonomy within an expanding commodity culture.

The second chapter analyses the metafictional dimensions of Robert Louis Stevenson's adventure fiction. In his essays, Stevenson vehemently insists on popular appeal as, for the professional author, a valid measure of aesthetic success. However, the implicit endorsement of generic convention that underpins such an idea contradicts

Stevenson's ethical writings, which deplore, just as vehemently, the social and moral conventions to which young people are made to adhere. Through a reading of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1881-82) and *The Black Arrow* (1883) as serials in *Young Folks* magazine, I analyse the metafictional strategies taken by Stevenson to mitigate the anxiety of influence expressed in his ethical writings. I will argue that not only did Stevenson see adventure fiction as ethically valid only when its adherence to generic convention was sufficiently signalled within the text, but that the strategies involved were also materially necessary – designed to alert purchasers of the text in volume form to precisely the kind of commodity they could expect for their money.

The thesis closes with a consideration of the writings of M.R. James and E.M. Forster, arguing that both authors use books to signal an epistemological crisis underpinning didactic and auto-didactic reading practices at the turn of the twentieth century. The academic protagonists of James's stories share with Forster's middle-class suburbanites a Ruskinian tendency to view books as the vehicle for written texts that enshrine (ready for readerly 'excavation') unfluctuating socio-political and cultural knowledge. Both writers depict readers whose understanding of the texts they consume is catastrophically, even tragically hindered by their obtuse elision of their own role, as readers, in composing the textual 'message' of that which they read. Yet what, for James, concerns predominantly a question of antiquarian methodology becomes, for Forster, a question of political engagement. *Howards End* (1910), 'The Celestial Omnibus' (1908) and *A Room with a View* (1908) all feature readers whose inability to acknowledge the significant specificity of their individual identities as readers – their gender, class and sexual orientation – in the creation of textual meaning threatens to uphold those identities as damagingly 'other' to the socio-political context in which their reading act takes place. These readers' refusal to read against the grain threatens to

facilitate their continual subservience to the dominant ideologies that give rise not only to the texts they read, but also to the ways in which they read them.

As politically charged discussions of reading at the turn of the twentieth century, Forster's fictions, like James's, present books as symbolic sites of contested textual meaning. Like all the authors discussed in the following chapters, their fiction formulates the book as an object the dominant 'ideas' of which are inescapably aligned with the irreconcilable cultural, social and political conflicts that underlie both the reading and writing of texts. All of these authors use fictional depictions of books and reading to formulate a response to the perceived breakdown of epistemological certainties in a protean, exponentially-expanding print culture. Ultimately, their fictions present books not as texts that automatically succeed in enshrining dominant ideas, but as sites upon which 'ideas' – the product of a dynamic interaction between text and reader – are continually shaped and reshaped as they circulate within the ideologically-charged materiality of a particular historical moment.

Chapter 1

No Purchase Necessary: Books and Ownership in the Writings of Oscar Wilde

These are the letters which Endymion wrote

To one he loved in secret, and apart.

And now the brawlers of the auction mart

Bargain and bid for each poor blotted note,

Ay! for each separate pulse of passion quote

The merchant's price. I think they love not art

Who break the crystal of a poet's heart

That small and sickly eyes may glare and gloat.

Is it not said that many years ago,

In a far Eastern town, some soldiers ran

With torches through the midnight, and began

To wrangle for mean raiment, and to throw

Dice for the garments of a wretched man,

Not knowing the God's wonder, or His woe?[104]

i. The critic as artist, the biographer as tyrant

In an intertext borrowed from Keats himself, the first line of Oscar Wilde's sonnet 'On

the Recent Sale by Auction of Keats's Love Letters' (1886) recasts the dead poet in the

guise of the mythical 'Endymion', whose curse is to be consigned to eternal slumber,

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[104] 'On the Sale by Auction of Keats' Love Letters', *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Fifth edition, Harper Collins, 2003), pp. 870-1. Unless otherwise stated, further references to Wilde's writings are to this edition and appear in the body of the text. The sonnet was originally published in *Dramatic Review*, 23 Jan 1886, under the title 'Sonnet. On the Recent Sale by Auction of Keats's Love Letters'.

whilst at the same time remaining young and beautiful. The implications of using this name from mythology to refer to the dead Keats are manifold. It transforms the author into a symbol of eternal beauty that remains, as in the opening words of Keats's poem *Endymion*, 'a joy forever'. Unchanging, the figure of the dead writer becomes conflated with the literary legacy of the works he has left behind. To view him through the filter of mythological precedent at once elides biographical details and renders the historical Keats voiceless – as an eternal slumber is bound to do. Endymion becomes a façade for an inevitably silenced poet, whose life and personality are supplanted by a literary legacy the beauty of which speaks not only for itself but also for the poet it replaces.

This elision of the author's proper name constitutes a refusal to recognise the poet as a historical entity and a decision to focus instead upon the writing that remains. It invites a reading of the sonnet alongside Michel Foucault's essay, 'What is an Author?' (1970). In that essay, Foucault argues that texts present their authors not as real historical personages pre-dating the works ascribed to them, but rather as a function within discourse. This works in conjunction with a Foucauldian idea of writing as 'a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears' – and from which he is perpetually reconstructed.[105] The substitution in the sonnet's first line similarly emphasises that the historical Keats is, in every sense, no longer with us. To speak of Keats's letters as those which 'Endymion wrote' is to underline the *historical* Keats's absence.

Such a distinction (between the mythical façade of 'Endymion' and the historical reality of 'Keats') recalls Foucault's insistence that the links 'between the proper name and the individual named and between the author's name and what it

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[105] Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' (1970), reprinted in full in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, 2nd Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 81-91 (281).

names […] do not function in the same way'. The author's name, he argues, 'performs

a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, […] [permitting] one to group together

a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to

others':

> [T]he author's name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a
>
> discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name
>
> seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least
>
> characterizing, its mode of being. […] As a result, we could say that in a civilization
>
> like our own there are a certain number of discourses that are endowed with the
>
> 'author function', while others are deprived of it. A private letter may well have a
>
> signer – it does not have an author […][106]

In Wilde's sonnet, the situation is different, because a name other than the author's is

nevertheless employed to refer to the authorship of certain letters which, we know from

the poem's title, Keats wrote. In fact, while Wilde's speaker seems to adhere to

Foucault's recognition of 'the author' as a function in discourse that 'marks off' a

particular corpus of texts, his marking off is more inclusive than Foucault's, taking in

not only the poetical works, but also the letters – all are 'Endymion's' and all are

marked by the exquisite beauty of the mythical youth whose name is adopted to refer to

that corpus. If the author can be defined as the function by which a certain corpus of

works is taxonomised, its edges 'marked off', then the sonnet's refusal to name Keats

as the writer of the letters also marks off a different, more inclusive idea of the 'author

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[106] Ibid. p. 284.

function' than the one theorised by Foucault – it speaks of a refusal to 'mark off' the corpus in certain ways.

The association of 'Endymic' beauty with 'poor blotted note[s]' demonstrates, therefore, the speaker's willingness to bring the letters into an arena in which they might (like Keats's poems) be considered incipient artworks of similarly enduring beauty. Yet, the sonnet also points to an act of 'marking off' on the part of the auction attendees, which is in opposition to the speaker's own inclusive recognition of the letters as part of the body of Endymion's 'work'. Seeing the advent of Keats's letters in the public domain as an excuse to turn from 'art' to 'glare and gloat' at the figure of the author, the 'brawlers of the auction mart' unconsciously and unthinkingly equate the letters with an *historical* Keats whom, they imagine, these writings will reveal. For the 'brawlers', it is Keats himself whom the letters define or 'mark off' from an art they 'love not'. The comparison with Christ is especially resonant here. Neither Christ nor Keats are, in this poem, mentioned by name; both are absent centres whose meanings are generated by the 'wonders' and 'woes' of which they are the authors, but which also retain an autonomy beyond their origin in one individual. The 'brawlers', however, ignore the enduring beauty of that which these figures have done in favour of a focus on the physical relics of their existence as historical personages – turning not to Christ's genius, but to his 'mean raiment', not to the beauty of Keats's poetry, but to what his 'poor blotted notes' might reveal about the human being that wrote them.

Like Foucault, Wilde's speaker sees the ability to ascribe an author function as a sinister one, whose insistent tracing of textual meaning back to the figure of an author from whence it originally derives facilitates a means of surveillance – a means to 'glare and gloat' not only at the writing itself but at the author whom it allegedly expresses definitively in discourse. By this means, the 'ascription of discourse to an individual'

becomes a way of classifying not just texts, but also the individual named as their author, who becomes 'a projection […] of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice'.[107]

Conversely, by eschewing the use of Keats's name and citing instead the letters written by 'Endymion', the speaker reveals the writings' *distance* from the historical or biographical Keats: the way they have become subject to a Foucauldian vision of writing in which 'the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence'.[108] To emphasise the way in which Keats is now only present in and through the letters 'which Endymion wrote' is to provide a reminder that these letters are the work of an author function ('Endymion'), rather than of an author (Keats). It announces that the historical 'author' is now only present as a discursive product of the writings left behind – which is, paradoxically, no presence at all. Thus, the elision of 'Keats' for Endymion eschews biography and offers the letters as autonomous expression: it eschews the author 'function', one might say, because it eschews the author. Ultimately, Endymion, standing in for Keats, stands also for a corpus of writing that speaks only of itself. Like the Foucauldian notion of the author function, the sonnet 'depriv[es] the subject […] of its role as originator, and analyz[es] the subject as a variable and complex function in discourse'.[109] It turns away from the idea of an author as a 'free subject' who 'penetrate[s] the substance of things and give[s] it meaning', pointing instead to the ways in which publication can lead to that subject becoming enmeshed in already extant discourses at the hands of those determined to 'glare and gloat'.

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[107] Ibid. p. 286.
[108] Ibid. p. 282.
[109] Ibid. p. 290.

Wilde would go on to explain these ideas about the way in which textual meaning is the product of material circumstances and reader-response at greater length in 'The Critic as Artist' (1890). Taking issue with Matthew Arnold's definition of the function of criticism, Wilde's dialogue insists that the nature of an art object cannot be reduced to an essence, discoverable as it 'really is', but is rather an absence to be occupied temporarily by personal impressions. No longer a means of ascertaining the truth that lies indelibly within the object of study, criticism is instead represented as 'the purest form of personal impression', which is 'in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself' (*Works*, 1125). In Wilde's formulation, 'truth' is inevitably a matter of subjective interpretation rather than of objective discovery. The critic can never see the object as it 'really is', because the 'real' is, inevitably, an externally imposed product of the critical gaze. Consequently, it is imperative that the critic should recognise that his project must inevitably involve not the discovery of what the object really 'is', but rather the creation of a new *impression* of the object – in effect, an account of what it 'really is not' (*Works*, 1128).

In the sonnet on Keats's letters, however, the brawlers' insistence upon their ability to discover an already-determined Keats through the perusal of his letters belies an ingrained belief in authorship as a process involving the direct expression of 'truth', which attentive reading can reconstitute. Thus, by recasting autobiographical documents as art, Wilde's sonnet addresses a situation in which the indeterminate textual space of the art object's 'true meaning' is mistaken for a direct account of what, in himself, its author 'really' was. The tangible, yet fragile, 'crystal' representing the affairs of Keats's 'heart' reflects both the delicacy of the subject matter and the dangerously brittle nature of the 'truth' contained in the missives. That this crystal was

once whole implies the validity of the experience (re)presented in the letters. The brawlers' inability to reclaim the *truth* of the experience in any definitive, coherent form is evoked in the shattering of the delicate surface, which is 'broken' to reveal the *absence* of a kernel – Keats as a fixed historical entity – it does not, in fact, possess.

Wilde made explicit his distress at the reading public's apparent determination to view autobiographical writing as an unproblematic mirror upon the subject's soul in a review of two biographies of Keats.[110] Arguing against the idea that a diligent researcher could pin down a 'real' Keats lurking beneath the surface even of an apparently autobiographical text, Wilde takes issue with a letter written by Keats's friend, Benjamin Bailey:

> We do not doubt that when Bailey wrote to Lord Houghton that common sense and gentleness were Keats's two special characteristics the worthy Archdeacon meant extremely well, but we prefer the real Keats, with his passionate wilfulness, his fantastic moods and his fine incompleteness. We do not want him reduced to a sand-paper smoothness or made perfect by the addition of popular virtues (*Works*, 967).

As Wilde states, Keats is '*made* perfect' by the biographer, who nevertheless writes as if he had unproblematically found – was, indeed, unproblematically able to find – his subject intrinsically to be so. Bailey has, in Wilde's phrase, 'sand-paper[ed]' the author into something he simply never was. The real Keats, we are told, was a more complex individual, whose 'fine incompleteness' is at odds with Bailey's reductive account.

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[110] 'Two Biographies of Keats' (*Pall Mall Gazette* 27 September 1887); the biographies in question were Sidney Colvin's *Keats* (1887) in Macmillan's 'English Men of Letters' series and William Michael Rossetti's *Life of John Keats* (1887) in the Walter Scott Press's 'Great Writers' series.

Questioning whether these 'two special characteristics' might really amount to the determining truth about the subject in question, Wilde attacks the alarming ease with which the poet is brutally 'reduced'. This metaphor for the biographer's gaze invokes a painful process of literal dismemberment, as the poet is forced violently into a discursive mould which his character is too complex to fit. The extract does not – as Wilde's later writings would – go so far as to suggest the non-existence of a historical Keats transcending textual representation. Indeed, the review asserts a preference for a 'real' Keats whom Bailey 'reduces'. Nevertheless, the extract illustrates the concern, displayed in Wilde's sonnet, that biographical writing could be used as a way of reducing not only the text but also its *author* to a 'sand-paper smoothness', ready for incorporation into the 'popular virtues' of a dominant grand-narrative.

At the heart of Wilde's review of the two biographies, therefore, is a Hegelian critique of conceptions of 'the truth' as something always already imbued with 'Absolute' value.[111] Hegel argues that, by comparing the object of investigation to notions whose value is seen as already intrinsic ('Absolute'), the object is either 'uncritically taken for granted as familiar' by the investigator, who merely reinforces as 'Absolute' pre-existing concepts such as 'God, Nature, Understanding, sensibility, and so on', which are 'made into fixed points' at which the investigation must always begin or end (Hegel, 59). The result is that simple reiteration of existing concepts is nevertheless taken as a 'truth' that precedes both its iteration and its interrogation. In fact, argues Hegel, what is taken for a subject's 'essence' is merely the illusory product of its *expression* by an observing consciousness which, like Bailey's, is involved in the unthinking application of 'popular virtues' (in this case, 'common sense' and

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[111] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), trans. A.V. Miller, in *The Hegel Reader*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 52. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text

'gentleness'), rather than in questioning how and why those virtues signify as they do. To overcome this recourse to the 'Absolute' as something that already exists before the dialogic process of investigation, Hegel emphasises the distinction between an object's 'being-in-itself' (its essential nature) and its 'being-for-another' (its nature as mediated by the subjective observing consciousness).[112]

Despite this emphasis on the distorting effect of the observing consciousness upon the apprehension of an object's essence, however, Hegel's conception of 'truth' remains teleological. For him, a dialectical appreciation of the object's 'being-in-itself', involving a continual re-examination and re-appropriation of the object's 'being-for-another', might eventually reach a point where knowledge *of* an object is reconciled with the object's essence – where being-for-another becomes synonymous with the object's being-in-itself. Yet, as Marx points out in his critique of Hegel's philosophy, any inquiry that seeks this teleological endpoint is inevitably inflected by the inescapable materiality of the thinker's social, cultural and economic context.[113] In Marx's formulation, therefore, the telos is never reached but is instead endlessly deferred, leaving only a series of dialectically constructed 'presents' in which 'truth' depends on mutually dependent binaries, whose nature fluctuates continually. Consequently, any stance that expresses the object's essence (the 'being-in-itself') as something *already* available for direct expression must be viewed with suspicion.

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[112] In *Oscar's Books* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008), Thomas Wright argues that Hegel's examination of mankind's construction of knowledge through dialectically determined 'Notions' of the world would have appealed to Wilde owing to its implicit rejection of empiricism. Wright notes that Wilde came to Hegel 'via the classical commentaries of Benjamin Jowett and John Addington Symonds', on whom Hegel had had a profound influence, and through William Wallace and T.H. Green's introductions to the philosopher, which Wilde purchased in the winter of 1877-78. Wright also cites a revealing annotation made by Wilde in the margin of his copy of one of Benjamin Jowett's introductions to Plato's *Dialogues*: 'Wilde believed that scientists often unconsciously projected on to facts the cultural and intellectual prejudices of their historical period. […] Jowett argues that such preconceptions are far more pervasive in scientific and "commonsensical" cultures which, believing themselves to be "resting on facts", are unaware that they are actually "resting on ideas". Wilde glossed the passage with the word "good"' (Wright, 98). Richard Ellmann also lists Hegel as one of the writers cited in Wilde's commonplace book (*Oscar Wilde* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988], p. 40).

[113] See Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844).

Wilde's conception of 'truth' is Hegelian in his consistent dismay at the way in which an object's 'being-for-another' is nevertheless presented as its 'being-in-itself' – an emphasis that finds its fullest expression in the 'The Critic as Artist', with its insistence that the critic's gaze is inherently transformative, rather than reflective. It is modified, however, by a Paterian aestheticism that, in rejecting Hegel's teleological focus, foreshadows Marx's critique. For Pater, 'the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it distinctly' – an approach that underlines *The Renaissance* (1873):

> What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? […] How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?

By prioritising his own subjective gaze, Pater emphaises, with Hegel, the importance of not confusing personal impression with universal truth. By making an understanding of one's own impressions the *end* of his enquiry however, Pater postulates that the critic 'has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience'. Whether such questions are 'answerable or not', they are simply 'of no interest to him'.[114] While Pater concurs with Hegel in defining truth as a fragmentary 'group of impressions […] in the mind of the observer', he differs in seeing 'experience itself', rather than 'the fruits of experience', as the 'end' of human enquiry – a move that rejects implicitly Hegel's notion that experience and its lasting impressions, dialectically appraised, are primarily useful in so far as they must

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[114] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1928), p. x. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

eventually lead cumulatively to a triumphant apprehension of the Logos (*Renaissance*, 248, 249).

Pater dramatises this aesthetic inflection of Hegelian idealism in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), through the episode of Marius's encounter with the work of the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus of Ionia. Heraclitus posits the 'denial of habitual impressions, as the necessary first step in the way of truth' – a rejection of this 'use-and-wont' mode of seeing, that amounts to 'a false impression of permanence or fixity in things'.[115] In fact, far from displaying a stable unchanging essence, 'the objects of our ordinary experience, fixed as they seem, are really in perpetual change'. For Heraclitus, as for Hegel, the ability to recognise that one's own fleeting impressions are not necessarily cohesive with the object's unchanging essence is 'but the preliminary step towards a large positive system of almost religious philosophy': '[t]hat continual change, to be discovered by the attentive understanding where common opinion found fixed objects, was but the indicator of a subtler all-pervading motion – the sleepless, ever-sustained, inexhaustible energy of the divine reason itself' (*Marius*, 109).

Yet, while Heraclitus (like Hegel) aims at a glimpse, however fragmentary, of 'the divine reason itself', Marius (like Pater in *The Renaissance*) refuses to see this recourse to personal impression merely as a means to regaining the divine Logos. For Marius, Heraclitus's philosophy has the effect of making 'all fixed knowledge impossible' as 'truth' becomes centred only in 'the momentary, sensible apprehension of the individual', which becomes 'the only standard of what is or is not'. In fact, 'the possibility, if an outward world does really exist, of some faultlines in our apprehension of it' leads to a broader question concerning 'the *criteria* of truth' and the embrace of 'the subjectivity of knowledge' (*Marius*, 112; Pater's emphasis). What is important,

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[115] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 108. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

after such a realisation is not man's ability to apprehend innate truth as locatable externally, but his ability to 'rely on the exclusive certainty to himself of his own impressions' (*Marius*, 110).

'The Critic as Artist', with its celebration of subjetivity for its own sake, is to some extent simply a reiteration of Pater's attempt to dethrone, as the central tenet of criticism, the detection of absolutely verifiable truths regarding the interpretation of creative works. Wilde's poem on Keats's letters and his review of the two biographies emphasise the socio-political necessity of the aesthetic project that 'Critic as Artist' lays out. The tendency amongst those bidding for Keats's letters to view them as the autobiographical expression of a completely determined subject, and the biographer's presumed ability to chronicle his subject as if he were an already-determined entity (rather than, at least partly, the result of a series of impressions, derived from the artist's *work* and residual in the mind of the biographer) could, Wilde suggests, have profound implications for the autonomy of identity.

This was precisely the threat that underpinned the fears, expressed in Wilde's letters, concerning the fate of Wilde's own correspondence after his incarceration in 1895 on charges of 'gross indecency'. When his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, proposed to print, in the *Mercure de France*, some letters that Wilde had written him from Holloway prison, Wilde was understandably outraged. Such letters, he declared, 'should have been to you things sacred and secret beyond anything in the whole world'.[116] Bidding Douglas recall 'the sonnet he wrote who saw with such sorrow and scorn the letters of John Keats sold by public auction in London', the letter argues that, far from clarifying to outsiders how matters between himself and Douglas 'really'

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[116] *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2000), p. 717. Further references to Wilde's letters are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

stood, the appearance of these letters in print would simply constitute an open invitation to his enemies to confer their own meanings on what had been intended for Douglas's eyes alone. Wilde was concerned that the public, armed with attitudes such as those displayed by the 'truth-seeking' brawlers at the auction of Keats's letters, would be similarly keen to discover in his own writings alleged 'truths', which were in fact entirely of their own making – 'truths' which, characterised as inimical to 'popular virtues', could be used to vindicate that moral edifice. His concerns were not unfounded. As an ostensibly autobiographical work, *De Profundis* (1905) was itself to suffer the same fate at the hands of reviewers as Keats's letters had done at the hands of his biographers.[117] Wilde's words would be wilfully misinterpreted in an attempt to reduce him to a 'sand-paper smoothness', by the application, if not the 'addition', of 'popular virtues'.

In 1905, when Wilde's friend and literary executor, Robert Ross, first published the letter in an edited version, the tendency amongst some critics was to read the work as an indication that the man who wrote the volume under discussion was finally presenting himself in his 'true' form. In an unsigned item in the *Review of Reviews*, for example, W.T. Stead noted that the work represented 'the cry of the heart *de profundis*'.[118] He also wrote to Ross, praising him for 'having permitted us to see the man he really was'.[119] Stead's misguided attempts to view the letter as a window on to Oscar Wilde's soul can be partly attributed to the title given the work not by Wilde, but by Ross himself – *De Profundis*: 'From the Depths'. Moreover, the blurb that occupies *De*

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[117] The letter was written between January and March 1897. A heavily edited version of the letter was published in 1905, under the title *De Profundis*. The complete text of the manuscript was not published until 2000. For an account of the work's complicated publication history, as well as a description of the manuscript, see *Letters*, p. 683, n. 1. I use '*De Profundis*' to refer to the first published edition, edited by Robert Ross and bearing the title he himself chose. Wilde's manuscript will be referred to as 'the prison letter'.

[118] [W.T. Stead], 'Oscar Wilde's Prison Meditations', *The Review of Reviews* (London), 31 (March 1905), 314.

[119] Quoted in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (Routledge, 1974), p. 242.

Profundis's cover, could hardly be said to have helped matters, proclaiming the volume

to be 'probably the most sincere and personal expression of his peculiarly artificial and

sensitive nature'. The description goes on to announce that '[a]s a human document this

work possesses unique value and interest, and the beauty of its style entitles it to a high

place in the literature of the time'.[120] Both the title and the description work to

perpetuate the idea that the book provided an account that was somehow definitively

'true', a slipping of Wilde's stylistic mask to reveal the real Wilde underneath. It is not

conceded that the very fact of its 'beautiful style' might provide room for doubt

regarding the text's status as an infallible 'human document'.

Other reviewers could not resist categorising the work as the definitive account

of the entity 'Oscar Wilde', which vindicated the status quo as far as he and his crimes

were concerned. In *The Month*, for example, M.D. Petre paints the author as a tragic

figure, whose actions delivered him 'from a world which he could fashion to his

likings, inspired by his artistic and creative instincts, to a world in which he had simply

to take his place and endure the inevitable'.[121] As sympathetic as this might sound, it

nevertheless constructs Wilde's narrative as a cathartic tragedy in which the ability to

'fashion' one's own self-image is 'inevitably' overtaken by state-sanctioned control.

The reaction to *De Profundis* is significant, therefore, because it illustrates the

power conferred upon reviewers by the appearance of the letter in book form,

illustrating how publication can transform a life merely by presenting it for public

perusal. Their idea of the book as a purveyor of truths about a biographical or

autobiographical subject underlines these reviewers' belief in reading as an activity by

which subversive elements could be reabsorbed into a dominant social narrative – in

which reading discovers (rather than ascribes) meaning to the individual subject about

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[120] Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* [ed. Robert Ross], (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), front cover.
[121] M.D. Petre, 'De Profundis' in *The Month*, CV (April 1905), 385-87 (385).

whom an account has been written. As with the biographical Keats, Stead's easy substitution of the textual entity 'Wilde' for the man as he 'really was' depends on the appearance and interpretation of certain documents – so much so that *De Profundis*'s publication allowed Wilde to be replaced, in the eyes of many reviewers, by a book. The event thus betrays the reviewers' alarming amenability to the possibility of such a substitution – their willingness to accept not only the truth of the statements made within the text, but also the inherent validity of the assertions they facilitate about the kind of person Wilde 'really' was. It betrays a naïve faith in a mimetic model of textuality in which texts represent the subject directly, along with an endorsement of the concomitant view – that texts allow the subject to be directly apprehended.

The episode illustrates the way in which an idea of a book as a purveyor of truths can facilitate a powerful method by which subversive elements could be stripped of individual autonomy and (re)appropriated into the dominant social narrative. Stead's presumed ability to conceive of a 'real' Wilde is intrinsically linked to the appearance of the book in the literary marketplace. As with Keats, the creation of the textual entity 'Wilde' rested upon a belief in the ability of a text to make available a set of truths about an objective and *objectifiable* reality. Indeed, it is hard to decide which is the most shocking – the fact that, for most reviewers, Wilde had effectively been replaced by a book, or their belief that such a substitution was possible in the first place. Either way, the episode is of paramount importance in demonstrating the sociocultural significance of Wilde's insistence upon the dialogic nature of art and reality – that interpretation always involved the creation of a new 'truth' as much as it had to do with the discovery of an innate one. Even those who, like M.D. Petre, saw *De Profundis* as a moving account of a great man brought down by a tragic weakness, never questioned whether this was an interpretation they brought *to* the text in order to consolidate

existing constraints upon what was and was not considered a 'weakness'. Petre's

comments betray a preference to view his interpretation of Wilde's story as not only

inevitably invited, but also validated, by the text's position as an infallible,

unambiguous expression of its author's soul.

Discussing Wilde's own attitude to the practices that led to his incarceration,

Patricia Flanagan Behrendt misses this point, therefore, when she complains that Wilde

'appears to have been politically ignorant of the issues at stake and of the humanitarian

importance' of that which 'writers like [John Addington] Symonds and [Havelock]

Ellis were attempting to accomplish', preferring to rely instead on 'self-centred

posturing'.[122] It cannot be denied that these sexologists, who were attempting to find

expression for the homosexual as a distinct, emergent, category of identity, were

attempting work of 'humanitarian importance'. Drawing on Foucault's contention that

the late nineteenth century saw the rise of an idea of 'the homosexual' as a

psychological category – something one could be defined as being, rather than as

merely a series of sexual acts one performed – Ed Cohen and Alan Sinfield both point

to the ways in which homosexuality is characterised, in the period, by a discursive

silence. Cohen, for example, discussing newspaper reports of Wilde's trials, comments

that, while their 'narrative structures organised and gave meaningful shapes to the

events they purported to accurately represent […] at no point did [they] describe or

even explicitly refer to the sexual charges made against Wilde'.[123] The most explicit

foregrounding of the absence of any discursive reality for Wilde's sodomotical

practices occurs in the *Evening Standard* on the 3 April 1895, where the Marquess of

Queensbury's libellous card was reproduced with the offending word excised: '"To

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[122] Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (Macmillan, 1991), p.15.

[123] Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (Routeledge: 1993), p. 4; see also Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Oscar Wilde, Effeminacy, and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994).

Oscar Wilde posing as ＿＿＿"".[124] In defining and pathologising the 'sexual invert',

Ellis and Symonds were attempting to make visible that which popular texts seemed

intent on making discursively invisible.

Yet, in filling this discursive silence by hypothesising the existence of the

homosexual as a pathological type, sexologists also evolved a scientific understanding

of sexuality and gender that reduced both to the components of an essential self. As

Richard Dellamora notes: 'their naturalising definitions insisted on the permanent

character of real manliness and womanliness while in effect bringing homosexuals

under control of medical legislation'.[125] Moreover, the idea that what one did was

somehow the inward expression of what one was had the potential to backfire in the

moral climate of late-Victorian Britain. The law claimed homosexual acts to be, by

nature, 'grossly indecent', and medical sexologists who apologised for the

homosexual's indecency by claiming that he was an unfortunate soul who could not

intrinsically *help* being indecent did little to alter the terms of the debate, maintaining

the homosexual's position as the *inversion* of 'normal' sexual orientation.[126]

Sexology is thus an intrinsic part of the apparatus involved in the production of

knowledge as an instrument of power. What the homosexual 'really was' continued to

be defined not only in relation to what he did, but also to how those deeds were

discursively constructed. This becomes increasingly obvious when one considers

Sinfield's argument that the reticence regarding the naming of the acts committed by

Wilde created a discursive silence which the author's person conveniently filled,

making Wilde's name a shorthand definition not only of the vague 'indecencies' he had

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[124] Quoted in Cohen, p. 145.

[125] Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 195.

[126] Wilde was prosecuted under Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which stated: 'Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is party to the commission of, or produces the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour'.

committed, but of the kind of person likely to transgress in this way. So, for example, in

E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (1914), the central character is only able to give expression to

the nature of his desires by describing himself as 'an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde

sort'.[127] In Foucauldian terms, sexological definitions of the homosexual as an invert of

the 'normal' male ensured that Wilde was prosecuted, and his memory persecuted, not

for what he had done, but for what he was. Ultimately, legal and medical discourses

imbricate with each other in their quest for a 'correct' definition of 'homosexuality' as a

species: 'by solemnly inscribing offences in the field of objects susceptible of scientific

knowledge, they provide the mechanisms of legal punishment with a justifiable hold

not only on offences, but on individuals; not only on what they do, but also on what

they are, will be, may be'.[128] This discursive 'pinning down' of the homosexual can be

traced in Stead's temptation to read *De Profundis* as a final, repentant confession of that

which lay beneath the 'peculiarity' of its style, which like those acts he had committed,

could be seen as the unmistakable symptom of its author's inalienable otherness.

Whether the act was one of stylistic or bodily transgression, the question remained: not

only '"Who committed it?" But: "How can we assign the causal process that produced

it? Where did it originate in the author himself?"'[129]

The disciplinary mechanisms that led to Wilde's discursive absorption into the

social narrative as the semantic embodiment of otherwise unspeakable vices was

anticipated by Wilde himself in his writings. In implying that even real events (like

Keats's affairs and his own transgressions) depend, for their significance, on the way in

which they are discussed and written about, Wilde presents a situation in which

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[127] E.M. Forster, *Maurice* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 139. See also Christopher Craft's account of the twenty-seventh case in Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*, in 'Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*', in *Representations*, 31 (Summer, 1990), 19-46 (p. 19). Ellis theorises that his case study literalises the substitution of Wilde's name for the label of the 'invert', sublimating his true nature in sexually explicit dreams about Wilde.

[128] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 18.

[129] Ibid. p. 19.

individuals are, in a sense, the 'biographical' subjects of state and society – in which an identity discursively imposed *upon* the subject is passed off as the expression of that which apparently resides naturally *within* the subject. The regulation of sexuality through discursive surveillance demonstrates how concerns about authorial intention, editorial policy and the assumptions of readers have socio-political consequences for the creation of identity and meaning: consequences against which 'self-centred posturing' provides an efficacious strategy of resistance, embodying as it does an anti-essentialism that escapes surveillance by insisting that there might well be nothing to survey.

Ross's attempt to rearrange the contents of Wilde's letter emphasises the extent to which the author's intention (the cry of the heart *de profundis*) is the product of the biographer-editor rather than simply a true reflection of the author's 'real' self. Suffering is the keynote of the original 1905 version of the text, whose opening line, taken in conjunction with the ascribed title, immediately initiates the text as one concerned primarily with the author's tribulations: '…Suffering is one very long moment' (*De Profundis*, 1). Although the opening lines of Ross's edition were originally written by Wilde, they have been shifted several pages and are now placed at the beginning of the work. The book, whose cover proclaims its contents to have come 'from the depths' of its author's soul, thus begins with an apparent statement of helplessness by a suffering prisoner. The three dots might be Ross's attempt to indicate the excisions he has made to Wilde's letter, but readers unaware of the fact that the letter is excised might be forgiven for mistaking this as a further indication of the long 'moment' of suffering. Ultimately, the rearrangement facilitates a reading of the passage as the introduction to a repentant confession of sin.

The reader of Wilde's original letter, however, free of such paratextual preconceptions, finds Wilde subtly unrepentant though *playing* the penitent's role. In fact, he seeks absolution only by undertaking a transferral of blame from himself to Douglas. He writes, for instance, 'I will begin by telling you that I blame myself terribly.' Yet, the next sentence completely undermines this apparent apologetic humility – 'I blame myself for allowing an unintellectual friendship, a friendship whose primary aim was not the creation and contemplation of beautiful things' (*Letters*, 685). What Wilde blames himself for is not (as certain critics who styled the work a 'tragedy' would have it) the crimes for which he was sent to prison, but for allowing himself to become influenced by Douglas to such an extent that he *allowed* himself to be sent to prison and brought to 'utter and discreditable financial ruin' (*Letters*, 687). Wilde's is only a performative repentance – the blame is ultimately placed upon Douglas as much as, if not more so, upon himself. None of this appears in Ross's edition, however, which takes great care to obscure the text's origins as a letter to Douglas. As a result, the exact nature of the author's suffering (whether it is deserved, whether it is a mode of penance, whether it is Wilde's own fault) is left in the hands of the reader whereas, as Wilde wrote it, his own culpability is entertained only to be rejected.

The construction and reception of *De Profundis* demonstrates the extent to which, in Jerome McGann's words, the 'universe of literature is socially generated': the extent to which authorial intention is distorted, even inverted, through the 'many relative centers which are brought to our attenton by our own acts of observation'.[130] What the case of *De Profundis* also illustrates, however, is what Wilde himself was keen to point out in the case of Keats's letters; namely, that when the nature of the autobiographical subject is apprehended as being directly accessible to the reader in a

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[130] McGann, p. 75.

damagingly simplistic way, not only the text, but the autobiographical subject *himself* is

in danger of being subjected to precisely this kind of 'continuous socialization'.[131]

Ultimately, Wilde had posthumously fallen prey to the kind of insidious surveillance

that attaches itself to books throughout his writings, where written texts are frequently

portrayed as a means of creating and fixing allegedly innate 'truths', which they are at

least partly responsible for manufacturing. As a result, in Wilde's works, books often

serve as tangible reminders of the way in which written texts can function not only as a

mode of individual expression, but also as a means of exerting power: a world in which

not only the book, but also the self, is usually the fruit of someone else's publishing

venture.

ii. The importance of being the author

Wilde's horror at Bailey's presumed ability to fashion a 'popular' Keats and pass him

off as somehow definitively 'real' is dramatised from the outset in *The Importance of*

Being Earnest (1895). Upon hearing of Jack's intention to propose marriage to

Gwendolen, for example, Algernon represents the institution sardonically as one

designed specifically to codify the experience of being in love. As such, it destroys the

uncertainty that is the 'very essence of romance' (I. 77).[132] The implication that

romance is tamed by the ritual of marriage introduces the play's negative conception of

acts which seek to bring the myriad 'uncertainties' of experience under control by

recasting experience as a set of codified performances – stripping it of spontaneity by

scripting it in advance. Just as Bailey had sought reductively to mutilate Keats's

character in order that it might cohere with 'popular virtues', so marriage is presented

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[131] Ibid. p. 73.
[132] Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. Russell Jackson (London: A & C Black, 1980); further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

as a means by which the 'many-sided mysteries' of love are mutilated in order to fit a reductive pre-determined mould. 'Meaning' is thus reduced to a set of communal fictions to which the object – whether it be an individual's identity or the nature of a given concept, like 'love' – is subjected, as it is forcibly (re)directed into the conduits of social ritual.

Lady Bracknell's easy dismissal of Jack's claim to be a Liberal Unionist is a further example: 'they count as Tories. They dine with us' (I. 535). This verdict would seem to support Ruth Robbins's argument that *Earnest* prefigures poststructuralist conceptions of identity by evading 'the notion that character is a deep structure that goes right through a person, where action is essence'.[133] Like Algernon, Lady Bracknell views life and identity as evolved from and through performance. Hence Liberal Unionists are defined by the social constructions that can be placed on their actions, regardless of what they profess to believe. Unlike Algernon, however, Lady Bracknell appears to remain quite unaware of the arbitrary basis of the conventions to which she insists upon enslaving other characters. The problem (and the joke) in *Earnest* is that performance is constantly mistaken for truth so that action is taken to define a corresponding essence. This in turn empowers the play's comedic project: to debunk the arbitrary process by which the conventional becomes the definitive by holding up to ridicule the way in which the definitive has become conventional.

The ridiculous equation of action with essence is thus both the main vehicle for humour in the play, and the constant object of its satire. In this sense the play coheres with Linda Dowling's definition of decadent literature as the expression of 'a cult of artifice', which refers habitually not to an extant 'natural' order of things, but to 'a

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[133] Ruth Robbins, *Pater to Forster, 1873 – 1924* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 109, 111.

world at one remove, a world already made into artifice'.[134] Dowling's contention is

that this recourse to a view of the world as always already 'artificial' constituted both a

symptom of and a reaction to a linguistic crisis arising from a 'new comparative

philology', which led to a 'theory of language as a wholly autonomous system'.[135] For

Dowling, decadent literature dramatises this theory, deploying language as 'a

counterpoetics of disruption and parody and stylistic derangement', exposing the

hollow centre of the meanings it creates as much as expresses.

In Wilde's play, rather than being viewed as the expression of an already innate

essence, identity is reconfigured as a series of autonomous performances that society

constantly undertakes to standardise according to authorised models. *Earnest* can thus

be seen to exemplify Dowling's conception of decadent literature as an attempt to

recognise a crisis in linguistic meaning. The autonomy of both language and identity

make possible a 'counterpoetics' – especially for the play's young female characters –

and thus exemplify decadence's desire 'to save something from the wreck'.[136] Yet the

parallel autonomies of both language and identity are also shown to be a double-edged

sword, at once empowering the individual self by emphasising its autonomy, whilst

also threatening to confiscate it by means of a reabsorption into any autonomous

narrative powerful enough to pass itself off as *the* definition of 'reality' to which others

must therefore be made to conform.

In defining the self as a series of performative roles – whether self-consciously

adopted or otherwise – within a (re)writable narrative, books become a vital and central

element of *Earnest*'s iconography. Throughout the play, a mistaken belief in the ability

of printed materials to enshrine objectively perceivable truths allows the book to

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[134] Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. ix, xi.
[135] Dowling, p. 15.
[136] Dowling, p. xv.

function as a means of exerting control over the individual subject, by proclaiming as true a particular configuration of 'reality'. *Earnest* is especially concerned with examining the socio-political consequences for identity in a world where life not only resembles but, on occasion, actually *is* an open book. By focusing upon episodes in which the definitive status of certain normative elements depends, quite literally, upon their being *published*, the play can be read as an analysis of the way in which the book itself can become a brutally effective means of social surveillance, creating the norms it purports objectively to record. The book is thus the hinge that links Wilde's play to the Foucauldian notion of the individual as not only the object, but also the result of the disciplinary apparatus responsible for the production of knowledge.

Lady Bracknell's notebook is an example of the many texts that allow the play's characters to find themselves measured against assumptions that are, quite literally, pre-written. It contains a list of eligible young men, to which Lady Bracknell is ready to admit Jack's name, should his answers to her enquiries be 'what a really affectionate mother requires' (I. 481). Her interrogation embodies the normalising effect of the examination: the means by which the 'rule' is established by condemning 'that which […] departs from it', making the exposure of that which 'does not measure up' the very method that makes measurement possible at all.[137] The documentary project of Lady Bracknell's notebook, maintained by inscribing as definitive the results of interrogations designed in advance to enshrine her own social agenda, enables the maintenance of the 'individual […] in his own aptitudes and abilities', under the gaze of a 'permanent corpus of knowledge'. The use of the book in this episode demonstrates how 'the deployment of force and the establishment of truth' are not separate aims, but imbricate with each other in the 'constitution of the individual as a

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[137] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 178.

describable, analysable object'.[138] So long as an idea of the book as the embodiment of 'a permanent corpus of knowledge' is upheld, Lady Bracknell can preside over 'a comparative system that [makes] possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts'.[139] By means of rigorous examination the suitors in the book are not recorded but produced as the embodiment of a body of quantifiable knowledge; their eligibility becomes '[the] effect and object of power', by also constituting them as the 'effect and object of knowledge'.[140] The suitors do not embody 'a set of circumstances defining an act and capable of modifying the application of a rule'; rather, the individual suitor appears only in the guise under which 'he may be described, judged, measured compared with others, in his very individuality; […] [as] the individual who has to be trained, corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.'

In making the book the means by which is brought about 'the entry of the individual […] into the field of knowledge', the play also makes it the symbol of the power enabled by this enforced absorption.[141] Lady Bracknell's book textualises society by prescribing the 'truths' by which society's narratives are, in turn, to be recognised and categorised – it is thus indirectly responsible for creating, as the basis of an examination, the social rules it purports to maintain as already valid. Her insistence on the definitive status of the process that has given rise to the notion of 'eligibility' it enshrines, enables her use of the book as the means of instigating and perpetuating an examination that modulates the society it claims merely to document – an unsettling move in which 'society' is figured as the manifestation of a series of reference works maintained by a horde of Lady Bracknells.

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[138] Ibid. pp. 184, 190.
[139] Ibid. p. 190.
[140] Ibid. p. 192.
[141] Ibid. p. 191.

The book acts, in *Earnest*, as the apparatus of what Foucault identifies as a 'disciplinary power' that aims at 'the progressive objectification and ever more subtle partitioning of human behaviour'.[142] For Foucault, power over the individual self 'is not possessed as a thing, or transferred as a property', but 'functions like a piece of machinery', in which 'it is the apparatus as a whole that produces "power" and distributes individuals in this permanent and continuous field'.[143] Basing his theory, initially, upon specific institutions (the school, the hospital, the army camp, the prison) he draws attention to the way in which such institutions subject their inmates to 'a whole micro-penalty', establishing a system of 'correct' behaviour in relation to time, activity, speech, the body and sexuality by punishing 'non-observance, that which does not measure up to the rule, that departs from it'.[144] Like the Foucauldian 'examination', Lady Bracknell's notebook 'places individuals in a field of surveillance [because it] also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them'.[145] It is an example of how surveillance *itself* 'makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish',[146] constituting 'the individual as effect and object of power' by constituting him as the 'effect and object of knowledge'.[147] In *Earnest*, the book is just such an apparatus, transforming Jack into 'the fictitious atom of an "ideological" representation of society; […] a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power […] called "disipline"'.[148]

In some ways, of course, Lady Bracknell is simply putting into practice the arguments put forth by Wilde himself in 'The Decay of Lying' (1889). Her selection of society's most eligible young men and the qualities that render them so, ensure that her

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[142] Ibid. p. 173.
[143] Ibid. p. 177.
[144] Ibid. p. 178.
[145] Ibid. p. 189.
[146] Ibid. p. 184.
[147] Ibid. p. 192.
[148] Ibid. p. 194.

book is a consummate example of the way in which life is nothing if not the mirror of already-available aesthetic models – just as Wilde had proclaimed it to be in that earlier essay. Lady Bracknell resembles the essay's definition of a 'great artist' – a figure who 'invents a type' so enticing that '[l]ife tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher' ('Decay', 1083). Such a definition of great art banishes teleological meaning by making truth 'entirely and absolutely a matter of style' – the domain of art, behind which life can only follow meekly ('Decay', 1081).[149] Having appreciated a certain kind of young man, Lady Bracknell extrapolates a type which she then uses as the basis for creating (rather than reflecting) the truth of 'what a really affectionate mother requires'. In this, she resembles not only a 'great artist', but also an 'enterprising publisher', who retains the stereotype necessary to reproduce a popular text.

As Wilde makes clear in 'The Decay of Lying', however, the tendency of life to imitate art (even more than art imitates life) becomes potentially problematic only owing to a widespread insistence that only the reverse was true: that art not only could, but *should* and *did*, unfailingly imitate life. Rejecting this idea, Wilde's essay argues that the process is, in fact, inescapably circular. In the end, art only enshrines ideas and attitudes which society either creates for itself, or has already copied from art's own originals. The episode of Lady Bracknell's notebook illustrates this circularity, and also illustrates the problems that arise when the rigid but false dichotomy of original 'life' and imitative 'art' is insisted upon. Lady Bracknell has no problem believing that her

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[149] In this sense, the essay appropriates and develops Charles Baudelaire's attack on a 'false premiss in the field of ethics', which held that nature was the 'source and type of all possible Good and Beauty' ('The Painter of Modern Life' [1863], in Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne [London: Phaidon Press, 1964], p. 31). In fact, Baudelaire argues, while evil 'happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art' – what is 'beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation' (32). Fashion, is thus simultaneously 'a sublime deformation of Nature' and 'a permanent and repeated attempt at her *reformation*' (33; Baudelaire's emphasis).

attitudes to that which 'really' affectionate mothers require are 'really' valid, or that her

list of men in whom these qualities have been detected might stand as a reliable

metonym for those very qualities. By publishing their names, she makes them available

as a standard by which others (such as Jack) can be judged – his place on the list would

assure his 'eligibility' by proving his ability to 'measure up' in a certain process of

examination. At the same time, however, Lady Bracknell seems not to realise that the

list merely exemplifies her own socially-informed idea of 'eligibility', rather than some

transcendent value matching that term in nature. The products of her subjective

examination are nevertheless recorded as the embodiment of a fact against other men's

'eligibility' is measured as a quantifiable value. She misses what Wilde's essay spells

out – the circular relationship of 'art' and 'life' – because she elides her own 'art'. The

book is thus a record of Lady Bracknell's faith in her ability to taxonomise society and

its inhabitants according to certain categories that define what they 'really' are (or, in

Jack's case, are not). It is an example of the way in which *Earnest* points to the tyranny

that obtains when the subject – indeed, the world itself – is viewed as 'really'

representable.

The result is a situation in which truth is not discovered but enforced – in which

power lies not in the ability to uncover and maintain an intrinsically legitimate status

quo, but in the ability definitively to *impose* the boundaries of what is and is not

legitimate. What is presented, in 'The Decay of Lying', as the means to self-expression

gives way, in *Earnest*, to insidious surveillance. Social identity is recast as an open

book, there to be written by anyone who wishes to take up the pen. Indeed, in one of the

most celebrated of the play's comic episodes, the infant Jack Worthing describes how

he was discovered in a handbag, his place in the perambulator having been usurped by a

three-volume novel. Having been replaced at birth by a novel – the most conventional

embodiment of Victorian fiction, in terms both of form and of production methods –

Jack is subjected, as a marriageable adult, to comparison with Lady Bracknell's

notebook. His whole life is lived, not just by the book, but also *as* a book – one which

he has not written himself. By pointing to the way in which books enshrine ideas of the

'normal' and the 'natural', which are then used as the means by which other characters

are judged, the play undermines the book's symbolic currency as the means by which

truths about society are recorded as already valid – the results of an examination

already undertaken, there to be consulted as the measure of what can be legitimately

expected of its subjects.

The play echoes, therefore, Foucault's critique of taxonomy in *The Order of
Things*. By presenting the book as the vehicle for a discourse that exerts power by

expressing, 'as though already there', a concept whose meaning has 'no existence

except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language', Wilde's play

deploys the book as a symbol of the power residual in discourse and in the

taxonomising gaze.[150] In this symbolic capacity, books are available to Cecily as an

object at which to direct her protest against the narrow remit of Miss Prism's

educational programme. Throwing the books disgustedly aside, she systematically

enumerates and rejects their subject matter: 'Horrid Political Economy! Horrid

Geography! Horrid, horrid German!' (II. 98) Crucially, it is not to any specific aspect of

the subjects that Cecily objects, nor to any particular element of the textual content of

the volumes – at least, not explicitly. Instead, the act of codification represented by the

volumes carries a weight and authority of its own – an authority as visually imposing as

the heavy volumes themselves. Like Lady Bracknell's notebook their presence as

catalogues of facts grouped by educational discipline represents a means of encoding

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[150] Foucault, *Order of Things*, p. xxi.

knowledge into specific forms. Their very presence speaks of their ability to survey and taxonomise the multiplicity and complexity of the subject matter they represent.

Cecily herself, on the other hand, spends much of the play demonstrating the impossibility of such direct 'recording'. She proclaims, for example, the impracticality of having to record certain speech acts directly, complaining that she does not know 'how to spell a cough' (II. 439). As with Vivian in 'The Decay of Lying', Cecily is aware that 'reality' is, in art, a matter of representation. Little wonder that she takes the fact of Canon Chasuble's never having 'written a single book' to be a sign not of ignorance, but rather of 'how much he knows' (II. 536-38): a book is not taken as proof of knowledge, but simply the physical result of the act of writing and publishing. If writing is the record of the writer's subjective gaze, therefore, books are the potential agents by which the results of that gaze are falsely passed off as the embodiment of definite knowledge. Far from the means to disseminate verifiable information, they are as much society's props as the play's. As in the example of the 'Literature' biscuit tin discussed in my introductory chapter, books are, in this episode, not only physical embodiments of what is known to be true, but also of what, in a given society, goes under the banner of truth: just as the biscuit tin unconsciously exposes the limited way in which a particular corpus of texts can become commodified and objectified as the embodied symbol of all 'literature'. Cecily's brutality towards her schoolbooks can thus be seen as an attack on the symbolic currency of books as the embodiment of an arbitrary taxonomy that is nevertheless presented as 'the truth'.

If the play presents books as the instruments through which social conventions are normalised, however, then it also critiques the play's older characters' complicity in obtusely upholding the symbolic currency of books as records of that which is *already* normal and natural – a complicity against which, through her physical rejection of the

schoolbooks, Cecily openly rebels. The most notable example of the kind of complicity

that Cecily rejects comes in the form of Miss Prism's veneration of the rigid

conventions of the three-volume novel. The artificial and limited nature of these

conventions is neatly summarised in Miss Prism's assertion of what fiction definitely

and unequivocally 'means': '[t]he good ended happily, and the bad unhappily' (II. 54).

Though presented in comic terms, her approach has disquieting implications, driven

home by her reaction to the 'death' of Jack's younger brother, Ernest – a fictional

character who, in her eyes is conventionally 'bad'. Upon learning of his 'demise', she

comments, 'What a lesson to him! I trust he will profit by it' (II. 223). Of course, had

Ernest ever been real, he is unlikely to have gleaned any 'profit' from such a 'lesson' –

despite having been assigned the unhappy ending which is the requisite fate of the 'bad'

fictional character. The episode illustrates the way in which reality and fiction, far from

being separate, actually imbricate with each other; reality, in Miss Prism's formulation,

is fundamentally allusive, drawing its inspiration from the books society writes about

itself. It is a potent and concise demonstration of the way in which books can act as

tools by which individual identities are given a 'sandpaper smoothness' – forcibly

written back into the social narrative contained within the prescriptive volumes that

document established definitions of what is 'good', 'true' and 'natural'.[151]

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[151] For a history of attitudes towards the 'fictionality' of the novel form, see Catherine Gallagher, 'The Rise of Fictionality' in *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 336-63. Discussing the novel's increasing recourse, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to 'the confines of the credible' (337), Gallagher argues that mid-eighteenth-century writers like Henry Fielding developed a use for fictionality 'as a special way of shaping knowledge through the fabrication of particulars' (344). In the nineteenth century, such an attitude underlay the relationship of the novel's fictionality to the 'real' world, in a manner traceable in Miss Prism's reading practices: 'one is dissuaded from believing the literal truth of a representation so that one can instead admire its likelihood' (346). Wilde's play demonstrates the dangers of such an attitude taken to an extreme – Miss Prism is so persuaded by the 'likelihood' of events in the novels she reads to the point where what is 'likely' in fictionality becomes an infallible guide to 'literal truth'.

For Miss Prism, fiction not only strives for, but also achieves, a direct mimesis of a social reality that already operates according to a set of obvious 'meanings', which fiction has only to recover. Ultimately, what fiction 'means' for Miss Prism is also, disturbingly, what society 'means'. Such a claim itself depends on the acceptance not only of fiction, but also of 'the real' it represents, as always already normal and natural. In suggesting that 'good' and 'bad' are not copied from an originary definition, but are defined according to the way in which 'the real' plays out as narrative, the episode underlines the dangers that characterise a world in which a determination to separate fiction and reality only leads to an even more determined belief in a new set of fictions.

Earnest thus presents the triple-decker as an agent of the phenomenon described by Foucault as 'panopticism'. Jeremy Bentham's ideal prison 'arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately', and the novel arranges social unities along identical lines.[152] So long as fiction is upheld as a valid reflection of what really constitutes 'good' and 'bad', it has the panoptic function of performing, on the reader's behalf, the work of taxonomising the society it represents. Foucault's phrasing is significant. It is not that spatial unities are arranged in a way that enables an existing meaning to be apprehended and recognized – rather, the panopticon 'arranges spatial unities' which, having been arranged, '*make* it possible to see constantly' and *thus* 'to recognize immediately' who is 'good' and who is 'bad', a recognition which, ultimately, seals their fate. Similarly, in Miss Prism's conception of fiction, knowledge of what makes a subject 'good' or 'bad' is not apprehended, but *created* via the mechanisms through which they are described – the archetypal plot, style and characters that, for her, define the triple-decker as a literary institution.

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[152] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 200.

Thus, what D.A. Miller has noted of panoptic discipline is also true in novelistic discourse as it is characterised in *Earnest*: both are 'interested in putting in place a perceptual grid in which a division between the normal and the deviant inherently imposes itself'.[153] Miller's study of the nineteenth-century novel draws attention to the way that even those novels which, like George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1873), contain an 'explicitly thematized *censure* of discipline', are complicit in a project of 'social regulation and standardization'.[154] To illustrate his point, Miller offers a reading of Balzac's *Une ténébreuse affaire* (1841). Among the characters of that novel are two agents of the secret police, Peyrade and Corentin. While Peyrade 'could decapitate someone with his own hands', Corentin's methods are more insidious; he is 'capable of entangling innocence, beauty, virtue in networks of calumny and intrigue, of coolly drowning or poisoning them'.[155] Like the omniscient narrator in a novel, Corentin's mode of policing functions on the basis of a total surveillance that allows him to take charge of individuals precisely by involving them in 'a "world" and a "plot"'.[156] Corentin himself, whose task is 'conceived as a penetration of social surfaces', possesses '"impenetrable" powers of vision' that 'have already been penetrated by the narration that renders him'. Thus, with the excuse of being '[o]n the side of perspicacity, Balzac's narration assumes a fully panoptic view of the world it places under surveillance […] and its complete knowledge includes the knowledge that it is always right'.[157] Ultimately, in fact, it is 'hard to distinguish omniscience from the social control it parallels, since the latter too is often a matter of '"mere" knowledge'.[158]

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[153] D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 18.
[154] Ibid. p. 19.
[155] Ibid. p. 22.
[156] Ibid. pp. 22-23.
[157] Ibid. p. 23.
[158] Ibid. p. 27.

Yet, for all that it resembles those recording impulses that produce the individual subject as both the object and effect of knowledge – impulses exemplified in the power wielded by Lady Bracknell through her notebook – the omniscient narration of the triple-decker remains a stylistic device that offers only the illusion of omniscience. To empower the book as panopticon – as the location of 'unities' that anatomise individuals in society, enabling the reader, like the figure in the watchtower, 'to recognize immediately' – takes more than an implied omniscience of representation; it also requires a reader who, like Miss Prism, harbours an assumption that the novel not only should, but apparently often *does*, offer 'a permanent corpus of knowledge' about the world. It requires a readership that views what fictional characters do and the manner in which they do it as less important than what they can thus be 'recognized immediately' as *being*. Betraying a naïve determination to seek out the moral import of that which she reads, even as she insists upon the fictionality of the events to which that import is attached, Miss Prism is just such a reader – determined to weave back into society the morality gleaned from its representation in fiction. It is a state of affairs slyly implied in the naming of this arch novel-reader – despite an unwavering belief in the novel's ability to reflect the world as it is, Miss Prism also suggests that the reader's gaze is ultimately, like her crystalline namesake, more refractive than reflective.

iv. The Soul of Man Under Authorship

One can read *Earnest*, therefore, as an attempt to destabilise the moral, social and political tyranny of books by exposing moral and social laws as always mediated, rather than always natural. The play exposes the way in which the assumption that about authors' abilities directly to chronicle meanings already 'there' in the world about which they write transform books into tools by which such mediation can be effected.

In this sense, *Earnest* is congruent with Wilde's essay on socialism, in which the self is similarly presented as a text-in-progress and where identity is conceived of as a battle for authorship. 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891) conceives of late-Victorian society as one whose denizens labour under a 'sordid necessity of living for others' (*Works*, 1174). *Earnest* demonstrates the centrality of books to the argument, making explicit a link already implicit in Wilde's formulation of the self as authored rather than innate. 'The Soul of Man' presents late-Victorian society as one in which people go around 'thinking other people's thoughts, living by other people's standards […] and never being themselves for a single moment' (*Works*, 1182). *Earnest* identifies published and manuscript volumes as sources of both, locating 'other people's thoughts' in Cecily's schoolbooks and 'other people's standards' in Lady Bracknell's notebook. At the same time, however, the play demonstrates the way in which the idea of the book as an expression of power depends on the tyrannical ubiquity of the idea of the book (even the avowedly fictional book) as a mirror of identifiable types discoverable in the 'real' world – a fallacy that secures for the book its dangerous status as a receptacle for 'truths' about people.

The representation of books in *Earnest* can be linked, therefore, with the wider rejection of an essential self that Jonathan Dollimore has identified as underlying Wilde's writings. Describing Wilde's encounter with André Gide in Algiers in 1895, Dollimore describes the older man's desire to 'demoralize' Gide 'in the sense of liberate from moral constraint' and, in doing so, to 'undermine that lawful sense of self which kept Gide transfixed within the law'.[159] Implicitly, identity is seen here as an artificial set of 'moralizations' imposed externally in order to maintain a 'lawful sense of self'. By upsetting this 'lawful' self, Wilde aims to bestow upon the younger man a

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[159] Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 4.

degree of personal autonomy unfettered by the tyranny of 'lawful' constraint. In 'The Soul of Man', such tyranny is presented as the enemy of what Wilde takes to be the sole end of a socialist state. Hence, his definition of Socialism as any system through which each man's self (his soul) is allowed to develop untrammelled by societal or governmental influence, the removal of which will ensure a quickening of a latent, subjective self. The point is simple: 'There is no one type for man. There are as many perfections as there are imperfect men' (*Works*, 1181).

Wilde's influence on Gide is clearly detectable in the latter's *L'Immoraliste* (1902). In that novel, Gide offers a protagonist (the French scholar, Michel) who comes to the realisation that the books in which he has hitherto immersed himself serve only to inflect, rather than reveal, the world as it really is. After such a revelation, Michel reports, the 'miscellaneous mass of acquired knowledge of every kind that has overlain the mind gets peeled off in places like a mask of paint, exposing […] the authentic creature that had lain hidden beneath it'. Consequently, Michel sets out to reclaim 'that authentic creature, whom everything about me – books, masters, parents, and I myself had begun by attempting to suppress' and to banish the 'secondary creature, the creature who was due to teaching, whom education had painted on the surface'. Like Wilde, Gide argues not only that society is largely responsible for creating a self that comes to be considered innate, but also that the book is a crucial instrument in the enforcement of such an idea. Both writers liken the self to a book, presenting identity as a (re)writable space: 'I compared myself to a palimpsest; I tasted the scholar's joy when he discovers under more recent writing, and on the same paper, a very ancient and infinitely more precious text.'[160]

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[160] André Gide, *The Immoralist*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 51.

Nevertheless, to read *L'Immoraliste* is also to note an important sense in which Gide (or, at least, Michel) deviates from the implications of Wilde's insistent 'demoralization'. In offering this image of the palimpsest, the novel endorses a view of identity as already ingrained and innate – an original entity to be rediscovered beneath a false surface. Yet, in 'The Soul of Man', Wilde had advocated the removal of any and all dominant ideas of what the self was, is and should be in order to facilitate the free expression of an individuality which, though latent, is the sum, rather than the origin, of its expression. He writes, 'it will be a marvellous thing – the true personality of man – when we see it': crucially, the passage foregrounds the immanent nature of the 'true self', emphasising that 'we' have not 'seen it' *yet* (*Works*, 1179). Similarly, in 'The Decay of Lying', Vivyan is adamant that the 'more one analyses people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear. Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature' (*Works*, 1076). Ultimately, '[w]here we differ from each other is purely in accidentals: in dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit and the like'. For Wilde, what matters are the 'accidentals', the outward appearance – the uppermost and not the *bottom* layer of the palimpsest. If the person can be said to be like a book, then it is only because *both* are textual spaces that never lose their potential for being rewritten. For Wilde, therefore, the revelation of a 'true' self is not obtained (as Michel mistakenly assumes) through the removal of a superficial mask in order to expose the truth concealed beneath. Instead, it entails a reversal of the surface/depth model whereby the true self is deliberately composed by adopting a set of already available signifiers. The expression of the self becomes, in short, not a revelation, but a continuous process of creation and re-creation. Ultimately, '[t]ruth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style' (*Works*, 1081).

Where Gide's protagonist urges the exposure of the original document beneath a social palimpsest, therefore, Wilde's view is closer to that espoused by Foucault who argues, in terms which apply to the arguments advanced by the hero of *L'immoraliste*, that the man 'whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection more profound than himself'.[161] Always *already* the product of society and the texts it produces – always *already* a result of measurement against an established corpus of 'permanent' knowledge – the self cannot be 'reclaimed', having been a fabrication from the outset. Already textual, self-expression depends upon an individual's recognition of the self as not only never 'natural', but also as never having been 'natural'.

The idea of self-assertion that Wilde advances is borrowed from Baudelaire and underlies the decadent idea of the self. For Baudelaire, those who attack or avoid 'the artificial' in their attitudes and appearance resemble 'one of those half-wit peacocks whose elegance is the creation of his tailor and whose head of his barber'. Such creatures 'exist very much more for the pleasure of the observer than for their own'.[162] Unless armed with the weapon of 'self'-consciousness, Baudelaire argues, the individual self is in danger of succumbing to 'the pleasure of the observer'. To assert oneself consciously is, conversely, to reclaim the self in one's 'own' image by asserting the right to *create* that image. This is, in *Earnest*, what self-assertion means. In that play, writing, like the cosmetics that Baudelaire praises, becomes the instrument of a liberating counterpoetics. The book still resembles the stifling instrument of social conformity encountered in Gide's work; but, in and through the production of counter-texts, it is also the means by which individuality can be asserted.

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[161] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 30.
[162] Baudelaire, p. 35.

Throughout the play, Cecily and Gwendolen consciously reject the idea of an essential self by constantly pointing out that one's actions do not reveal, but rather *create* the self through performance. In response to Algernon's enquiry as to whether her hair 'curls naturally', Cecily replies that it does – albeit 'with a little help from others' (II. 505-6). Her awareness of nature's imitability demonstrates, paradoxically, that intervention necessarily precedes the display of what is apparently already 'natural': that the existence of the 'natural' relies on the taxonomic act that defines it. For Miss Prism, reading and writing work together to ensure the book's proper function as a means for the distillation of a subject's innate 'nature' in a written form. Thus, while Miss Prism's formulation constantly seeks the 'truth' of character, Gwendolen and Cecily are adamant that 'in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing' (III. 28-29). While Miss Prism places her supreme trust in the legibility of a work's substance, therefore, Gwendolen and Cecily insist upon the self-authorship attainable through a conscious embrace of style *over* substance – a rejection of stiflingly definitive 'nature' in favour of an elaborate self-nurture.

Gwendolen, for example, expresses early on her hope that she will 'develop' but is also determined that her development will not follow a natural course. Rather, it will follow the course which Gwendolen 'intends' (I. 297-98). This is an expedient escape from a 'natural' course which, as the play demonstrates continually, is merely the quintessence of that which is collectively *deemed* natural by society and propagated by its books. Indeed, Jack Worthing begins and ends the play by finding himself exchanged for books – his infant self having been swapped for a manuscript, his marriageable adult self spends the final scene frantically searching for his name in the Army Lists. As Christopher Craft has noted, he spends the play not only seeking, but also actually finding 'his "natural" or "proper" identity in an antic succession of texts'.

By having Jack end the play claiming to have discovered the vital importance of being Ernest – apparently abandoning triviality in the discovery of what he always 'naturally' was – Wilde in fact ends the drama 'with a punnning recognition of, on the one hand, the determinative power of prior inscriptions and, on the other, the transvaluing power of substitution'.[163]

If books are the way in which the natural is imposed upon the play's younger protagonists, however, the play also takes care to emphasise writing as a strategy for resistance – an opportunity to write one's own personal 'natural'. An example is Cecily's use of her diary, which is presented as a deliberate contrast with the prescriptive three-volume novels beloved by her tutor. Claiming that her aim in keeping a diary is 'to enter the wonderful secrets of my life', she argues: 'if I didn't write them down I should probably forget all about them.' (II. 40) Miss Prism is ready with a homiletic response: 'Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary we all carry about with us.' (II. 43) Cecily retorts that memory 'usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened' – in fact, she believes memory to be 'responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us' (II. 46-48). The exchange connects memory, the novel and autobiography in a complex network of allusion that makes representable truth contingent upon the way in which texts are produced and consumed. Miss Prism's belief in memory's infallibility as a means of directly recording the real betrays a belief in the existence of an essential self that can be easily and conveniently summarised – and thus easily explained away as either good or bad. Yet, the allusion to Mudie's recalls the ways in which the novelistic 'self' is largely the product of the harsh moral requirements demanded by the literary 'nurse' that dominates the system under which these novels have been produced and

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[163] Craft, p. 37.

distributed. Emphasising memory's fallibility, Cecily underlines the inadequacy not only of the literary system to record, but of the individual consciousness to *directly perceive*, the 'many-sided mysteries' which constitute an event or a person.

In writing her diary, therefore, Cecily is well aware that the record is just as impressionistic as the memories it purports to record. Instead of adhering to the mistaken belief that memory is inescapably aligned with truth, she inverts the idea by constructing a narrative in which memory is indelibly connected with writing and authorship. Her diary chronicles events which, as Algernon discovers, have yet to happen, containing the entire history of their courtship before any of it has had a chance 'really' to occur. Foucault argues that a 'monument for future memory' is also 'a means of control and a method of domination […] a document for possible use'.[164] Yet, while Cecily's diary reclaims writing as a means of control, it also eschews its potential as a 'method of domination'. Literally replacing memory with a self-authored volume, it exposes the artifice not only of memory, but also of the narratives to which it gives rise.

In this sense, Cecily self-consciously foregrounds what Lady Bracknell unconsciously elides, reclaiming the book as a means of empowerment by openly *acknowledging* the interchangability of the book and the self. Her interview with Algernon mirrors Lady Bracknell's with Jack, yet it also inverts it in a manner that offers an important commentary on the use of self-authored texts as a means of exerting power. Both scenes involve a proposed suitor's individuality becoming subsumed in the details established in a pre-written record – in both cases they are, literally, brought to book. Yet Cecily's interview demonstrates the way in which her diary is a construction, consciously designed to change reality into the shape desired by the writer. Believing Algernon to be Ernest, the lover with whom Cecily has already imagined an affair of

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[164] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 191.

several months' duration, she scripts their conversations, altering them to make them more stylistically appealing: 'I don't think you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it?' (II. 444-46). Here, although style takes the place of substance, it is not, as in Lady Bracknell's case, ever mistaken *for* substance. Lady Bracknell assumes her notebook to be a truthful chronicle of already extant ideals, but Cecily's writing begins from the premise that her account is subjective, stylised and largely (if not entirely) fictional. The conventions it purports to maintain are not collectively-held precepts designed to make the individual conform to the demands of a wider social structure, but an ideal narrative constructed by one subject as a model for her *own* life.

If, as 'The Decay of Lying' suggests, 'the basis of life […] is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained', then Cecily's diary can be seen not as a means of gaining power over others, but of enshrining her own power to imagine and fulfil a narrative of her own choosing and, indeed, of her own authorship. Foregrounding the complete separation of textuality from an ability (or even a need) to represent the 'real', Cecily's diary legitimates a concomitant disregard for a view of reading as a means of discovering truths about the world as it 'really is'. In this way, *Earnest* links the socio-political thrust of 'The Soul of Man' with the literary-critical ideas of 'The Critic as Artist' by making the basis of self-realisation a conscious decision to see the text 'as in itself it really is not'.

Arguing that 'the dominant category for Wilde is not art, but style', Neil Sammells has drawn usefully upon the concept of *bricolage*, especially as deployed by Dick Hebdige to twentieth-century subcultures, in order to outline the political consequences of Wilde's insistence upon the superficial quality of the meanings which

reading apparently reveals.[165] As Sammells explains, *bricolage* is a term borrowed from anthropology, which names 'the subversive process by which subcultures seize upon and appropriate commodities in order to ascribe to them new meanings, shaking them free from their "authentic" associations'.[166] Hebdige himself endorses Umberto Eco's definition of *bricolage* as a form of 'semantic guerrilla warfare'.[167] For Sammells, this is an apposite description of the way in which Wilde handles genre. Rejecting the idea that the society comedy's trivialities can be peeled away to reveal a reality that they subvert and mock, Sammells contends instead that the comedy is, in fact, '*all* surface': 'For Wilde, playwright and *bricoleur*, generic and specific dramatic pretexts are appropriated and displayed: they are figures in the carpet, not the shell that hides the kernel in the nut. That process of display is a matter of style.'[168]

I would argue that what Sammells sees as a fundamental feature of Wilde's dramatic writing could be extended to the presentation of the self within that writing. Like the plays that contain them, the characters' true meanings are revealed as being not a revealed 'kernel' but a series of appropriations (or impositions) directly linked to a process of reading or writing undertaken either by themselves or on their behalf. In emphasising the location of meaning in the surface details and not in an inner 'kernel' of truth, the self becomes entirely a matter of what it expresses, rather than the other way around. The replacement of the infant Jack with a three-volume novel and the adult Jack with the codes enshrined in Lady Bracknell's notebook cannot, therefore, be seen as *substitutions* for an authentic Jack which they serve somehow to obscure. The play offers 'Jack' as an entity under construction, formed by the enforced appropriation of texts forced upon him from without – but it also portrays Cecily as a character able

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[165] Neil Sammells, *Wilde Style* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), p.3; Sammells's emphasis.
[166] Ibid. p. 71.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid. pp. 82-83; Sammells's emphasis.

consciously to plan her self-development by writing it in advance and appropriating it retrospectively. Both characters are built from the books they read – the difference is that one consciously gathers books about herself, while the other has books thrust upon him. The self and the book are thus linked by a mutual reliance on an idea of writing not as the expression of an already-authentic essence, but as the appropriation of pre-existing thoughts, ideas, images and tropes. As a fluctuating *collage*, deliberately unmoored from the 'authentic', its coherence, like that of the taxonomies analysed by Foucault, is transient at best. In this sense, the individual is as 'authored' as the books he or she reads – to read becomes, paradoxically, an act of appropriation, whilst to live becomes an act of authorship: a deliberate unmooring of the self from the 'authentic', in order to escape the taxonomic frameworks that external forces impose tyrannically.

In 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' (1889), for example, the actions of the poisoner, T.G. Wainewright, are presented as more artistic than his writings. Rather than an unfortunate biographical fact, Wilde's essay argues, murder must be taken as Wainewright's supreme artistic medium. The quality of his writings, it is true, 'hardly justifies his reputation', but Wainewright 'recognised that Life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it'. The essay recalls the inversion of Art and Life which 'The Decay of Lying' also makes, but adds a telling disdain for an obsession with 'production' as the 'vulgar test' of an artist's greatness, suggesting that genius lies as much in what an artist is or does as in the objects for whose production he is responsible (*Works*, 1095). It is also a validation of Wilde's pronouncement, in 'The Critic as Artist' that criticism is 'more creative than creation'. After all, the aesthetic brilliance of Wainewright's criminal antics is not innate, depending upon the presence of a sympathetic interpreter to present them as 'artistic'. In this essay, therefore, it is hard to see where representation ends and the self begins.

But then, that is the entire point: by representing murder as a triumph of style, rather than the expression of an innately deplorable moral substance, the essay redefines substance as the invention of a particularly brilliant stylist – just as *Earnest* does when it presents Cecily's life as the inevitable fulfilment of her diary.

Cecily's diary, therefore, enshrines a strategy of resistance that counteracts the damaging assumptions Wilde had already complained of in his review of two biographies of Keats – namely, that there had once existed a 'real' subject that biographers could recover simply through reading, and that subsequent biographical accounts could present to the reader as Keats's real personality. Underlying these assumptions are two major principles, which Wilde's writing rejects: that a book can express a definitive truth and that a writer is able to make assertions of truth about a human subject that is, fundamentally, knowable. In effect, Wilde's sonnet suggests that what was up for auction was not just Keats's letters, but also the opportunity to proclaim definitively upon their 'meaning'. Mistaking writing for direct and infallible expressions of internal 'truth' – mistaking style for substance – the 'brawlers' operate under the misapprehension that to read Keats's letters is also to read 'Keats'. In ascribing such assumptions to the bidders, Wilde's sonnet postulates the ownership of texts not as something that begins and ends with a transaction in the marketplace, but as a concept whose significance extends beyond that realm to become an important factor in the politics of identity, where the right to interpret is confused with the right to proclaim the truth about the writing subject. The auction-goers' frantic bidding implicates them in a system in which meaning becomes the constructed product of vulgar consensus, and in which consensus is also passed off as 'truth': a system in which, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, the literal death of the author entails the

monstrous birth of the consumer.[169] It is to the implications of book ownership in such a culture that the chapter now turns.

v. No Purchase Necessary: Wilde, Henry James and identity in the marketplace

Examining the historical context of the novel in the first two decades of the twentieth century, David Trotter has noted the 'cultural implications' of a 'shift of emphasis, in economic theory and practice, from production to consumption, and from the satisfaction of stable needs to the creation of new desires', which he sees as characteristic of the period.[170] Drawing on the work of Lawrence Birken, Trotter argues that the gradual demise of classical political economy meant that 'desire began to replace property as the "symbolic badge of individualism"' as the turn of the century approached.[171]

Trotter takes Stanley Jevons as an example of a new generation of economic writers who 'converted economics from a theory of production to a theory of consumption, and thus broke decisively with the productivist ideology of Adam Smith, Ricardo, Mill and Marx'. Jevons argues that production ought no longer to be seen as a means of increasing the wealth of nations, but as a means of 'maximising pleasure'. Production – and, by implication, property – was no longer the end, but the means: 'a kind of detour, something the consumer had to undertake in order to ensure further consumption'.[172]

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[169] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1967) in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Hatch (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., 1977) pp. 142-48 (148).

[170] David Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1895-1920* (London & NY: Routledge, 1993), p. 11; there are many 'introductions' to this period of literary history, but Trotter's is unique in the extent to which it foregrounds the way in which the period's literature is influenced by this shift in economic outlook. As such, I have drawn heavily upon his work, especially the lucid account given in the first chapter.

[171] Ibid. p. 13.

[172] Ibid.

For Jevons the fact 'that there are many things, such as rare ancient books, coins, antiques, etc., which have high values, and which are absolutely incapable of production now' tends to undermine the productionist assumption 'that value depends on labour'.[173] Nor could value be said to lie in utility, since some of the most useful commodities (such as water) are free. To account for these difficulties, Jevons formulates a theory of 'marginal utility', which involves estimating a commodity's value according to the utility to the consumer of one *additional* unit. In most cases, for example, an additional diamond will be of greater value to the individual than an additional pint of water. For Jevons, this means that, in practice, value would depend upon the 'will or inclination of the person concerned', its utility no longer inherent, but arising out of a commodity's 'relation to man's requirements'.[174]

Jevons's ideas are symptomatic of the abandonment in the late nineteenth century of an economics that located value not in a commodity's utility, but in its scarcity – a system that, as Birken points out, marks the beginnings of 'a systematic ideology of individualistic desire'. The supreme individualism that characterised this new consumerist ethos is perhaps best summated in Patten's pronouncement that the laws of supply and demand were no longer based on an object's inherent utility, but were founded instead upon the more subjective 'laws of enjoyment'.[175]

For Trotter, one of the most immediate and striking ways in which the 'shift in emphasis from production to consumption' finds its way into the period's fiction is through the representation of the 'new practice' of shopping.[176] Identifying shopping as symptomatic of an emergent economic ethos centred not in the needs, but in the idiosyncratic desires of the consumer, he offers a cogent analysis of the consequences

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[173] Ibid. pp. 13-14.
[174] Ibid. p. 14; emphasis added.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid. p. 16.

of this 'new practice' for the politics of identity. In a climate where 'purchase satisfies desire rather than need', he argues that the act of purchase enacts a 'mirroring of subject in object which will enlarge, in a modest way,' the identity of the purchaser.[177] His contention is that shopping allows consumers not only to fulfil, but also to express their individual desires.

The consequences of Trotter's proposition are strikingly at play in the penultimate book of Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903). The episode in question sees the protagonist, Lambert Strether, taking a train to the country, having failed in his task of retrieving the wayward Chad from the charms of Paris and returning him to New England. He aims to detach himself from the intricacies of familial diplomacy of which the city has become redolent and experience instead 'that French ruralism, with its cool special green'. Being 'but a land of fancy for him', the excursion is romanticised. Though stirred by curiosity, Strether's aim is not to explore, for the first time, an unfamiliar landscape. Rather, he hopes to visit that France which is, for him, 'the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letters' – in short, he seeks physically to visit a land that he has already frequented in imagination. His journey into the rural vistas of France is intended only to stimulate another journey, by imagination, into the memory of a landscape glimpsed 'through the little oblong window of the picture-frame'. Strether has, indeed, one particular picture in mind, recalling 'a certain small Lambinet that had charmed him, long years before, at a Boston dealer's and that he had quite absurdly never forgotten'.[178] His is not an idle visit, therefore, but an active

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[177] Trotter, p. 22. In a related argument, Judith R. Walkowitz also posits the positive consequences of 'shopping' for consumer identity, explaining how women, in particular, were given new autonomy as female flaneurs within the new context of West End department stores. See Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992), pp. 47-50.
[178] Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 452. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

search for France as portrayed by Lambinet: 'he could alight anywhere […] on catching a suggestion of the particular note required' (*The Ambassadors*, 453).

Strether's impressions of France are thus doubly removed from the tangible landscape. On the one hand, he is determined impressionistically to view the scene as the mirror of Lambinet's painting. On the other hand, his impressions of the painting originate in an experience now temporally distant. His visit to the Boston art dealer took place 'long years before' and he has never seen the work since, its price having rendered its purchase 'beyond a dream of possibility'. Since then, he has mythologised not only the work itself, but the purchase he never made. To remember the painting is to recall not just Lambinet's work, but also the scene of that aborted purchase: 'the dusty day in Boston, the background of the Fitchburg Depot, of the maroon-coloured sanctum, the special-green vision, the ridiculous price, the poplars, the willows, the rushes, the river, the sunny silvery sky, the shady woody horizon' (*The Ambassadors*, 453).

Strether's impression of the painting and of the scene it depicts is, in this passage, inseparable from the scene of his original encounter. The 'particular note' that he seeks depends on a remembered conjunction of 'weather, air, light, colour and his mood' (*The Ambassadors*, 453). But his memory of the painting is so intermingled with his memory of the dealer's shop that what appears, initially, to be the recollection of a painting, actually turns out to represent the memory of a 'mood'. Consequently, when Strether recalls a particular formation of 'weather, air, light, colour', it is impossible definitively to pronounce whether this conjunction of impressions reflects his memories of the painting or of the conditions under which it was encountered. In fact, his memory is not of a painting, but of an *encounter* with a painting – and it is this memory of an

encounter, of a purchase he never made, rather than of the painting itself, which now informs his visit to the French countryside.

What begins, therefore, as a meditation on art's capacity to prepare the mind for the beauty of nature proceeds immediately to draw back not only from nature, but also from its artistic representation. Lambinet's painting is neither directly perceived nor directly remembered by Strether. Instead, the impressions left by a work of art become inescapably mingled with the mediating gaze of the consuming subject and the refractive qualities of the context in which the artwork is encountered. As a result, Lambinet's painting passes into Strether's possession; not through a financial transaction, but through his own position as the source of a particular conjunction of impressions. He may never have purchased the painting, but its autobiographical significance – its inseparable commingling with the memory of encountering it at a particular time and in a particular place – ensures an imaginative hold (a different kind of 'purchase') upon his initial *impression* of the painting. This impression has remained his, even as possession of the physical canvas eludes him. Quite apart from any aesthetic attraction, it 'abode with him as the picture he *would* have bought'.

Indeed, when Strether finally settles on a spot at which to alight, what greets him is a scene reflective not of Lambinet, but of the *memory* of Lambinet as he once experienced him: 'it was all there, in short—it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet' (*The Ambassadors*, 453). The tripartite formulation is tellingly general – Tremont Street has come to signify France, which has come to signify Lambinet. But then, Lambinet has also come to signify France, which in turn has come to signify Tremont Street. The artwork itself recursively gives way to a trail of meanings that leads back, not to the work of art but to the consuming subject, in whom they cohere.

The whole chapter is thus a chronicle of the pleasures that obtain from the memory of a purchase not made. For Strether, the prospect of purchase ignites a latent desire. Having been offered as a commodity, the painting is no longer simply Lambinet's depiction of the French countryside – rather, it is transformed, under the consumer's gaze, into the image of what the consumer desires the French countryside to be. The presence of the art object as a commodity acts as a catalyst for the expression of the consumer's own desires. Offered for sale, the art object becomes an avatar for the desires it exposes for the consumer.

In this way, Strether's experience as a consumer tallies with Trotter's idea of shopping as an activity that enacts a 'mirroring of subject in object'. Yet, James's novel also serves to complicate Trotter's argument about the connection between shopping and the consumer's identity. When, in *The Ambassadors*, the art object is presented as a commodity, it is rewritten under the consumer's gaze, exposing its status as a textual space. But this revelation flows both ways. Certainly, the object could be said to 'mirror' the consumer, who makes it a subject of his gaze. In doing so, however, it also 'mirrors' the consumer *as* subject, exposing his own status as a text that has yet to express itself – that writes itself *through* as much as *in* the desired object. Thus, object and subject, commodity and consumer, are shown to be mutually responsible for the creation of a third text, the production of which is the inescapable consequence of the consumer's desiring gaze. The consumer thus intimately owns the object even when possession of the object as a physical commodity is deferred. On the one hand, therefore, Strether's shopping trip exemplifies an economic culture founded upon subjective 'laws of enjoyment'. But on the other, it demonstrates that, in an economy of production, the commodity's status as a vehicle for the idiosyncratic desires of the consumer also creates new opportunities for the interplay of subject and object in the

creation of identity. Where art is concerned, in a consumer society no purchase is necessary.

The heightened subjectivity with which art is approached in James's novel is echoed throughout Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist', which makes explicit what Strether's experience demonstrates implicitly – that any 'antithesis between' the critical and the creative faculties 'is entirely arbitrary'. Gilbert (the dialogue's main antagonist) is adamant that the unavoidable deployment of discrimination, selection and omission in mimesis ensures that all 'fine imaginative work', even that which 'seems to us to be the most natural and simple product', is actually self-conscious and deliberate (*Works*, 1118). In this, his view coheres with Arnold's in presenting the discriminating artist as a critic of life. Yet, where Arnold sees the work as the instrument by which the artist reveals an essential truth, which the critic later expounds, Gilbert is keen to emphasise the essential *artifice* of that which appears natural, unconscious and inherently 'true'. If 'artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty, and, indeed, without it cannot be said to work at all', then it must surely follow that criticism is also 'really creative in the highest sense of the word' (*Works*, 1124).

Gilbert's argument – that creation is as critical as much as criticism is creative – undermines the idea of an objective truth in representation by destroying the possibility of objectivity in the onlooker. Interpretation is always autobiographically orientated and influenced by previous cultural encounters. Deriving from the reading subject and not, finally, from the work being read, it is not really a record of the work, but of a reaction to it – it is 'really […] the record of one's own soul'. Having no direct appeal to an external standard, it is 'concerned simply with oneself'. It is '[a] form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life.' Ultimately, the critic's 'whole aim is to chronicle his own impressions. It is for him that pictures are

painted, books written, and marble hewn into form' (*Works*, 1125). In this sense, Strether as consumer resembles Gilbert far more than he resembles the 'brawlers' in Wilde's sonnet on the auction of Keats's letters. Fully conscious of the transformative nature of the consumer's complicity not only in the financial, but also the imaginative appropriation of the artwork-commodity, Strether recognises implicitly the double-edged nature of his purchase upon Lambinet.

James's novel and Wilde's essays, therefore, both point towards a market in which a commodity's value does not reside intrinsically within the commodity itself, but is instead bestowed upon the object by its ability to meet the idiosyncratic desires of individual consumers. Yet while both writers argue in favour of the new ethos of consumption, Wilde's writings also seek actively to discredit the productionist notion of value that consumption displaces. In doing so, he posits the need to embrace the role of idiosyncratic consumer as an urgent political necessity if the tyrannies of productionist notions of utilitarian use-value are to be avoided.

In 'The Soul of Man', for example, Wilde asserts that 'the recognition of private property has really harmed Individualism, and obscured it, by confusing a man with what he possesses':

> In a community like ours, where property confers immense distinction, social position, honour, respect, titles, and other pleasant things of the kind, man, being naturally ambitious, makes it his aim to accumulate this property, and goes on wearily and tediously accumulating it long after he has got far more than he wants, or can use, or enjoy, or perhaps even know of. (*Works*, 1178)

As the passage attests, private property is ultimately harmful to the cause of individualism because it is never, in the final estimation, actually 'private'. Rather, it is the tangible exhibit of the entirely *public* significance it has come to possess. The value of the property is seen to lie in its presumed ability to signify distinction, social position, honour, respect, titles and so forth. The value of property, in this estimation, is related directly to those 'values' that it has come communally to signify – but this communal agreement has been lost in sight. Paraphrasing and inverting Arnold's attempt to 'see the object as in itself it really is', one might say that, in 'The Soul of Man', a value communally conferred *upon* property has come erroneously to represent a value that the commodity in itself really offers. Viewed in this way, private property reflects not the individuality of its owner, but the consensus of society – the assertion of membership and affiliation to a system of already-ascribed values. The extent to which property is ever 'personal' is called into question; reconfigured as the communal embodiment of 'other people's standards […] practically what one may call other people's second-hand clothes', it is merely authority's means of propagating and perpetuating itself by 'bribing' the owner 'to conform' (*Works*, 1182).

In place of this system, Wilde draws upon Christ's teachings to formulate a new approach to property. According to Wilde, Christ's message (like Wilde's own) is that man should strive to 'be' himself. In pursuing such a goal, the concept of ownership, insofar as it involves 'accumulating or possessing external things', becomes redundant: 'Your personality does not need it. It is within you, and not outside of you, that you will find what you really are, and what you really want' (*Works*, 1180). Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to view Wilde's idea – ascribed to Jesus – as a wholesale rejection of personal property. What is advocated here is an emphasis on the way in which the 'personal' significance of 'property' never lies, pre-written, within the object itself, but

is brought *to* the object by the owner. It is a reconfiguration of property that emphasises the congruity between 'personal property' and 'personal expression'. Without this congruence, the 'personal' is erased and the consumer is left only with 'property'. As in Baudrillard's conception of property as 'moral furniture', Wilde presents property as a metonymic embodiment of the values of society, through which the dominant order asserts itself. Only in embracing and acknowledging the idiosyncrasies of desire can the individuality of the consuming subject be maintained.

In this way, Wilde's essay not only endorses a consumerist idea of a commodity's value, but also conveys an urgent dissection of its political necessity. The injunction, in 'The Critic as Artist', to see the object as in itself it really is *not*, is more than simply an absurd comic paradox. Its implication – that those who *claim* to carry out an Arnoldian right reading are actually speaking only of themselves and only for themselves – carries urgent political weight. Gilbert is quite explicit as to the implications of his argument: '[the] difference between objective and subjective work is one of external form merely. It is accidental, not essential.' Not only is all artistic creation pronounced to be absolutely subjective, but the field of 'artistic creation' is also widened to include any and all talk *about* creative works (*Works*, 1143). In the end, meaning is in the eye of the beholder, 'who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives' (*Works*, 1127).

Such absolute subjectivity of meaning allows the critic to become a great artist. But it also allows the more obtuse (one might say Arnoldian) critic to mistake their 'own soul' for the spirit of the age. In fact, the assumption that an object contains a true meaning, which the critic can uncover, is more than simple philistinism. So long as the fallacy of a 'true meaning' is maintained, criticism is synonymous with surveillance

and surveillance synonymous with criticism. It should not surprise us then, that in *Earnest*, Wilde makes the book a symbol of the relationship between property, self-expression and social surveillance – nor that the three-volume novel should be singled out for particular attention as a site upon which all three conjoin. By 1895, the status of the novel as a commodity had undergone changes. The most major of these was the rapid decline of the triple-decker. Yet this development was also intimately related to the beginnings of a major shift in the ways in which novels were physically obtained – in their status as 'personal property'. As Guinevere L. Griest explains in her study of Mudie's, such institutions 'maintained in the nineteenth century a reading public that borrowed, but did not buy original editions of novels'.[179] So entwined was the three-volume form with its mode of distribution that Griest places the 'end of the Victorian circulating library' not with 'the closing of Mudie's, but rather with the extinction of the triple-decker, a method of publishing so closely entwined with its prosperity that the end of the one spelled the doom of the other. The company itself survived until the 1930s, but its autocratic position was lost'.[180]

Griest outlines a market situation in which the dominant form of the novel-as-book depended upon an institution whose economic monopoly of the marketplace ensured near total control over which books the public would encounter and how. The three-volume form meant a higher price, which provided the libraries with 'a kind of insurance that readers would be compelled to borrow'.[181] It also worked as 'a handicap to the retail bookseller, already at a disadvantage because of the extra discounts often allowed to libraries'.[182] At the same time, however, the three-volume novel's position as the foundation stone upon which the circulating library's economic monopoly was

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[179] Griest, p. 1.
[180] Ibid. p. 6.
[181] Ibid. p. 11.
[182] Ibid.

built meant that the abrupt extinction of the three-volume form also spelled the end of the library's absolute dominance. Consequently, the one-volume novel's appearance as the dominant form from the late-1880s onwards coincided with the beginning of a process that led to the novel becoming something one was more likely to buy than ever before. No longer were new books something one invariably possessed for only a limited period of time. They could now be something one first encountered as a commodity – as a form of personal property.

As I discussed in my introductory chapter, other outlets for new fiction were available. Readers could purchase magazines in which new novels were serialised, buy novels from stalls at railway stations or obtain a copy of the latest instalment of a part-work novel by the likes of Dickens, Trollope or Thackeray. Yet, the fact that libraries dominated the distribution of novels in volume form – and the fact that magazines often had to appeal to a whole family – meant that they too came under the influence of social and moral 'safeguards'. Moreover, railway novels tended to be reprints of work that had already passed through the library system – not to mention the fact that W.H. Smith's, the leading vendor of railway reading, were as selective as Mudie's about the novels they stocked. Although the rise in borrowing versus buying figures was not extraordinary, it was tangible. Furthermore, the need not only to increase library sales, but also to 'attract those individual readers who could afford to buy rather than borrow' meant that the value of a new work of fiction would lie increasingly in its ability to satisfy 'the idiosyncratic desires of the reader-consumer'.[183]

Cecily's stated decision to read only those books that she herself has written represents the idiosyncrasies of consumer desires stretched to the extreme. At the same time, it is presented as the reaction of a young person who, in having books thrust upon

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[183] Trotter, p. 64.

her, has also had *meaning* thrust upon her in the form of a pre-written narrative. In this way, *Earnest* sets up the book as an embodiment of idiosyncratic consumer desire, in direct contrast to a productionist idea that saw the book as an object of utility, able to provide the purchaser with external, needful things – with moral, religious and political truths, which the reader could be expected to recognise as such. As books gradually took on the mantle of commodities formed by the consumer's idiosyncratic desires, they could no longer be expected to fulfil this 'need' for ineluctable truths – the reader-as-consumer would be less in thrall to the tyranny that books once exercised as representatives of communal fictions.

To emphasise the reader's role as co-operative in bestowing a value or significance upon the text is to confiscate the book's status as the product of an author able faithfully to represent innate truths about the subjects depicted therein. In eschewing, like James, the need to possess the commodity physically, Wilde underlines the political importance of recognising one's self as consumer by insisting upon the consumer as, finally, the co-author and not the passive receiver of that which an object apparently 'really' is in itself. Ultimately, the meaning of Keats's letters is brought to them by the consumer – what gives Wilde cause for concern in his sonnet is the inability of the 'brawlers' to see themselves *as* consumers, or to see the dead author and his manuscripts as textual. Taking 'The Critic as Artist' into account, any reading of Keats might be considered artificial – but any reading that fails to recognise its own artificiality, preferring to see itself as potentially definitive, is also tyrannical. The 'ownership' exerted by Keats's biographers is thus as illusory as those seekers after personal property, so vilified in 'The Soul of Man', who fail to recognise their own stake in the production of the text's meaning.

Ultimately, the difference between Cecily and Lady Bracknell, like the difference between the productionist and consumerist economic outlooks, might be said to lie in the degree to which they are prepared (or able) to recognise the impossibility of objective representation in art – and, consequently the legitimacy of the book as the final word on society and the people who inhabit it. Like Wilde's essays, *Earnest* simultaneously celebrates and warily warns against the 'birth of the consumer' at a time when books were slipping further and further from the remit of the libraries into the wider marketplace. In effect, Wilde's works can be seen not only as a manifesto for the role of art in a changing marketplace, but also as an eloquent and witty explication of the political urgency of recognising these changes. His writings present situation after situation in which a utilitarian attitude to art as the *guardian* of an unassailably legitimate status quo is symptomatic of a wider attitude to the self as not authored, but discovered – a misconception that could (and, in Wilde's case, poignantly did) transform writing into an imposition of power. Equally pervasive in Wilde's writings, however, is a counter-emphasis upon the ability of self-conscious artificiality – an acknowledgement that writing about the world is always, ultimately, to create or to uphold a co-authored fiction – to do away with the often unconscious tyranny that resulted.

Chapter 2

Terms and Conditions Apply: Robert Louis Stevenson's Metafictional Strategies

Wilde's ambivalence regarding the ways in which reading will inevitably influence the formation of readerly subjectivity emanates from a model of self-development borrowed almost wholesale from the theories of Pater and Baudelaire. These writers' view of the self and its experiences as inherently artificial leads them to champion art that foregrounds the artificiality already present in the 'real' from which art draws inspiration. Hence the central paradox of decadent aestheticism – that society is always already the product of its own representation, because it is always already the product of the art it consumes. This idea gives rise, in Wilde's writings, to a model of reading as always, to some extent, a personal appropriation of text – to read a book is thus, for Wide, to appropriate it for the self and thus, in one way, to 'own' it. Thus, despite his preoccupation with the consequences of ownership for individual self-expression within a commodity-ridden consumer culture, Wilde's writing often subsumes concerns about the particularity of a text's physical form within a wider examination of the implications of textuality itself.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), for example, fetishisation of the material book merely foregrounds the way in which the tangible volume is always itself textual. Obtaining multiple unbound copies of Joris-Karl Huysmans's decadent novel *A Rebours* (1884) from Paris, Dorian binds them 'in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods' – imitating the bibliographic practice of Huysmans's protagonist, Des Esseintes. Here is an instance in which the physical conditions of textual reception exert just as strong an influence upon the reader as the text itself. Highlighting the physical as also textual, the incident emphasises the way in which the

volumes' material form retains a role in determining their meaning as texts. They can be made to reflect 'the changing fancies of a nature over which' Dorian seems, 'at times, to have almost entirely lost control'. A change in the physical book is constituted here as a defence against the totalising influence of a text that seems 'to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it'.[184] Controlling the relationship between the self and the book's physical form, Dorian is able to assert himself against the text, which threatens to subsume the nature over which he has 'lost control'. Literally 'colouring' each reading experience, control over the material encounter allows Dorian to retain some control over the parameters of the textual encounter to which he apparently surrenders himself totally. For Des Essentes and Dorian, the discrete reification of the book as thing mitigates its universal influence over subjective autonomy.

The incident is an example of the way in which Wilde's writings simultaneously expose and overcome the dangers of textual encounter for a self whose nature is already textual and thus under constant threat of being rewritten by the texts with which it comes into contact: Dorian 'rewrites' the volume's material dimension in order to re-establish control over a textual content that threatens to rewrite Dorian. The paradigm is echoed throughout Wilde's works. Lady Bracknell's notebook, for instance, in being so manifestly self-authored, foregrounds her determination to exert power over self and society merely by proclaiming one configuration of both as the definitive original. In fact, the specificity of the physical medium is often, in Wilde, just one facet of a wider point about the ambivalent effects of textuality. What is true of Lady Bracknell's notebook is, after all, also the case with the diaries, textbooks and novels that appear throughout *Earnest*. Like Dorian's multi-coloured volumes, they represent an attempt to

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[184] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 123.

gain autonomy over the meaning of self and society. Their physicality is simply a convenient metonym for the tangibility of the abstract and arbitrary textual configurations to which they quite literally lend weight. Miss Prism's triple-deckers bring those texts into the purview of a particular literary system – that of Mudie's Select Library – and illustrate the stultifying effect of that system not only on literary texts, but also upon the society that consumes them. Ultimately, however, the play presents the specific physical form of the novels as less significant than the naïvely mimetic assumptions that have accrued to the kinds of fiction they represent. For the play's purposes, the reasons as to why, as physical commodities, triple-deckers promote happy endings for the 'good' and unhappy ones for the 'bad' – the social, economic and literary factors that locate the triple-decker historically – are ultimately less important than the unfortunate fact that, as texts, this is what they do.

In this chapter, I will argue that Robert Louis Stevenson shares many of Wilde's concerns regarding the relationship between reality and its textual representation, but that, unlike Wilde, he grounds his discussion of that relationship in the historically-specific material conditions that govern the production, circulation and consumption of such representations. Stevenson's approach to fiction – both in theory and in practice – raises similar questions regarding textual representation as those that plague Wilde. I will argue, however, that, as a writer who preaches the necessity of writing for a specific audience in a specific market, Stevenson contributes to the debate a more nuanced concern for the ways in which writers and readers have inescapably to deal with material conditions that cannot be avoided. In varying ways, his adventure narratives show signs of having been carefully tailored to suit specific markets. They are also metafictional, drawing attention to themselves as the product of a writing subject catering for the desires of a particular kind of reader-consumer within a specific

literary marketplace. Wilde's writing deals fully with the question of what it means to write, own and read a 'text': Stevenson asks the more specific question of what, within the rapidly expanding literary marketplace of the late nineteenth century, it means to write, own and read a 'book'.

i. Reading, romance and experience

In July 1888, as part of a series of articles for *Scribner's Magazine*, Stevenson composed an essay dealing with the enormous popularity of those authors who, although unsung in conventional literary circles, had gained a widespread notoriety among the mass-readership of cheap periodicals. 'Popular Authors' is representative of a coherent ideology of authorship detectable throughout Stevenson's writing. A reader-centric outlook that situates literature as a trade among other trades, it is an ideology in which literary merit depends on a writer's ability to meet the demands of his readers, just as every producer must meet the demands of the consumer on whose patronage they depend.

Stevenson imagines the habitual contributors to the penny press longing for a more respectable outlet for their literary aspirations in a realm more conventionally associated with literary success:

> [N]ot content with such glory as comes to them, they long for the glory of being bound – long to invade, between six boards, the homes of that aristocracy whose manners they so often find occasion to expose; and sometimes (once in a long lifetime) the gods give them this also, and they appear in the orthodox three

volumes and are fleered at in the critical press, and lie quite unread in circulating libraries.[185]

The passage appears patronisingly to consign these writers to the realms of sub-library inferiority. To brand the three-volume novel as 'orthodox' reinforces the situation of the penny serial on the fringe of conventionally respectable modes of literary production. It maintains a separation between the work of popular authors and those novelists who achieve a more conventional fame through the adulation of circulating library subscribers – the readerly 'aristocracy'. The popularity of these penny authors is, conversely, founded on the adoration of servants and tradesmen: '[y]our butcher, the landlady at your seaside lodgings […] the barmaid whom you doubtless court, even the Rates and Taxes that besiege your door' – these are the people who 'have actually read your tales and actually know your names' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 24-25). 'Popular Authors', therefore, performs several taxonomic operations: between popular serial literature and the novel; between the reading of the working classes and the reading of the middle classes; between 'orthodox' and unorthodox literary forms; between the relative glories of popular appreciation and critical success.

Yet, in acknowledging these disjunctions, Stevenson's aim is not to judge one set of literary productions as inferior and another as superior, nor is the essay an attempt to bridge the gap between the two. To do so would be to reinforce ideas of high and low culture when, in fact, by separating the penny serial from the novel, Stevenson is actually emphasising the wholly different standards by which each must be judged. Emphasising the relative nature of 'orthodoxies' of literary success, Stevenson

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[185] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Popular Authors' in *Essays Literary and Critical*, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *Tusitala Edition*, vol. xxviii (London: William Heineman, 1923), pp. 20-32 (7). Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

confesses that, for all the praise he has received from peers and reviewers, he has 'tried and on the whole […] failed' to please a mass readership:

> A servant-maid used to come and boast when she had read another chapter of *Treasure Island*: that any pleasure should attend the exercise never crossed her thoughts. The same tale, in a penny paper of a high class, was mighty coldly looked upon. (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 25)

As this self-assessment indicates, Stevenson was intensely committed to the notion that reading should be, first and foremost, a pleasurable exercise and that the adoration of readers, the very quantum of popular success, was not an achievement lightly to be dismissed.

'Popular Authors' encapsulates a continual insistence, in Stevenson's literary criticism, that any discussion of literary merit must take into account the tastes and reactions of readers who actually consume and enjoy fiction, rather than focusing narrowly on the aims and aspirations of the authors who produce it. His 'Letter to a Young Gentleman Who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art' (1888) reminds its correspondent (Stevenson's stepson Lloyd Osbourne) that an artist's career is defined by its relation to other 'honest trades', not least professional authorship (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 4). As with other tradesmen, professional writers have a duty to produce not what they themselves wish to write, but what the consumer desires and demands. It is, after all, the consumer 'who is to pay us […] for services that he shall desire to have performed. […] To give the public what they do not want, and yet expect to be supported: we have there a strange pretension, and yet not uncommon' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 7). The writer-as-tradesman formulation foregrounds the author's

task not as one of composition, but of production – a practice dependent upon the rules of supply and demand, rather than an ability to tap into some essential literary genius. Indeed, in this formulation, the ability to meet consumer demand successfully becomes itself a species of literary genius – an index of literary merit in which the author's own artistic ideals must always be reconciled to that which a particular readership desires.

'Popular Authors' can be read, therefore, as an analysis of popular fiction by a writer who wished not to dismiss, but rather to understand its enormous mass-appeal. To write such tales is, for Stevenson, not only a skill worth learning, but also one not lightly acquired. All professional writers, Stevenson argues, 'profess to be able to delight'. Yet, he adds, 'how few of us are!' To identify the writer as a tradesman peddling readerly 'delight', however, invokes the important question of how such a subjective construction is to be understood. After all, if the author is fundamentally a producer of commodities, it is necessary to know what exactly s/he is being asked to produce. It involves the difficult task not of proscribing, but of anticipating the reader's desires. How is this 'impudent design' to be fulfilled? (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 8-9). For Stevenson, the answer lies in the constant references, throughout his work, to childhood as a period in which narrative invention is allowed to shape and govern actual experience. As well as a defence of writing for the market, 'Popular Authors' presents an autobiographical reminiscence of the penny fiction Stevenson himself consumed avidly in childhood, as well as an attempt to provide the reader with a flavour of the 'delight' that attended this boyhood reading.

His summary of *The Diamond Necklace, or the Twenty Captains* by William Stephens Hayward, is a typical example. The story begins, Stevenson recalls, with the placement, by the protagonist, of an advertisement inviting nineteen like-minded gentlemen to join him in an exciting enterprise. Within the course of the story, these

captains must rescue the tale's imperilled heroine. Describing this episode, Stevenson emphasises not only the way in which the story's events are governed by the narrative conventions of genre writing, but also how popular genres evolve from the stereotypes and conventions of particular modes of publication. For instance, his summary eschews characters' names, replacing them instead with labels denoting their roles in the story: 'Is injured innocence, with her diamond necklace, to lie at the mercy of an aristocrat? Forbid it, Heaven and the Cheap Press!' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 22). In a story governed by the conventions of the 'Cheap Press', the laws of narrative can be entrusted to prevent the heroine's molestation. Yet, the moral absolute of 'Heaven' also appears to *require* the generic conventions of the press to ensure their successful implementation. The readers' 'delight' is figured as the product of generic convention, whilst simultaneously arising from an easy recognition of those conventions as the generic accoutrements of a particular publishing tradition.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the twenty captains' rescue is unhampered by such banal concerns as might hinder the success (not to mention the excitement) of such a journey in reality: 'As well as I can gather, there were no stations and no pointsmen on the route to Dover, which must in consequence be quick and safe' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 22). The only thing it has in common with 'other and less simple railways' is a line of telegraph poles. These the captains are able to destroy using a coil of rope, which one of them happens to have about his person; but not before another of their company, a blundering Irishman, hilariously botches things by destroying part of the engine in the process. In his synopsis, Stevenson emphasises the generic inevitability of these events, emphasising the lack of readerly surprise in the face of the patently improbable: 'One of them, you will not be surprised to learn, had a

coil of rope – in his pocket, I suppose; another – again I shall not surprise you – was an Irishman and given to blundering' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 22).

The evident strain of mockery in this summary should not detract from the simple fact that it is, first and foremost, a description of a fondly remembered reading experience. To characterise 'Popular Authors' as a work of description as much as (if not more than) a critique allows the essay to be read as the embodiment (rather than simply a satire) of a particular kind of readerly engagement. Far from denouncing the 'Cheap Press' as unoriginal or derivative, the essay argues that this is a form of print culture where the derivative is to be celebrated as the very foundations of the genre because of the readerly pleasure it provides. Indeed, elsewhere in the essay, Stevenson explicitly states that the kinds of pleasures to be found in a mode of reading that appreciates and responds appropriately to the deployment of conventional narrative devices and tropes is the most appropriate one in this instance. Such a response recognises, with the child-reader, that these tales, though 'acutely untrue to life as it is', are nevertheless 'pleasantly coincident with childish hopes of what life ought to be' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 23). For Stevenson, the link between the imagined recasting of adult experience for the purpose of child's play and the highly conventional nature of the popular literary romance derives from the dependence of both upon what the imagination can furnish as opposed to what experience confirms. They are, quite literally, such stuff as dreams are made on: 'Such tales as a man, such rather as a boy, tells himself at night, not without smiling, as he drops asleep; such, with the same exhilarating range of incident and the same trifling ingenuities, with no more truth to experience and scarcely more cohesion, HAYWARD told' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 21; Stevenson's capitalisation).

Stevenson's description of Hayward's story is not a criticism, therefore, but a definition of the kind of fiction Hayward set out to write – a definition offered as part of a larger quest to determine the pleasures that his readers craved and which Hayward so successfully provided. Fascinated by the nature of the 'art' involved in constructing a text so completely governed by the need to entertain, Stevenson asks: 'What kind of talent is required to please this mighty public? that was my first question, and was soon amended with the words, "if any".' While this appears to differentiate between popularity and 'talent', it is merely a prelude to a more subversive proposition. In fact, he suggests, a conventional attitude to mass-popularity, in which derivative works founded on a series of loosely connected incidents are to be denounced by dint of their preposterousness, is actually an aberration. A proper appreciation of these tales involves an acceptance of their unconventional mimetic assumptions, which are 'not true to what men see', but rather 'to what the readers dreamed' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 28).

In his essays, Stevenson constantly returns to the figure of the imaginative child to explain the enduring appeal of escapist literature for the adult reader. Like the roles conjured by childhood imaginations for the purpose of play, the situations presented in popular fiction provide the adult reader with a means of imaginative escape. In 'Child's Play' (1878), Stevenson comments that such a capacity for imagination ensures that the child's world is always imagined and never 'real': 'In the child's world of dim sensation, play is all in all. "Making believe" is the gist of his whole life, and he cannot so much as take a walk except in character.'[186] Adults are more keenly aware of the difference between life and play – but this does not mean that the impulse for play has disappeared. Indeed, the imaginative life they lead as children is preserved in the

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[186] Stevenson, 'Child's Play', *Virginibus Puerisque* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946), pp. 127-39 (134). Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

suspension of disbelief inherent in the act of reading: 'We grown people can tell ourselves a story, give and take strokes until the bucklers ring, ride far and fast, marry, fall, and die; all the while sitting quietly by the fire or lying prone in bed' (*Virginibus Puerisque*, 131). The essay on 'Popular Authors' revisits this correlation between adults poring over the book and the child engaged in play, suggesting that if, as adults, we have put away childish things, in reading they are temporarily taken out again.

As 'Child's Play' demonstrates with its classless (and genderless) reference to 'grown people', Stevenson's outline of the lingering return of the childhood impulse to imaginative play is not confined to the quarter-educated. It is not simply the likes of 'the shop-girl' who are provided with 'the pattern of their naked fancies' or furnished 'with welcome scenery and properties for autobiographical romancing'. Indeed, Stevenson is keen to point out that '[e]ven in readers of an upper class' the need to experience a readerly identification is essential in order to facilitate the imaginative business of fictional escape. Though apparently more sophisticated than the penny fiction that entertains the masses, the reading materials of both are governed by literary conventions evolved from readerly desire: 'The villain, even the heroine, may be a Feejee islander, but only on condition the hero is one of ourselves' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 31). The sentence neatly encapsulates the expectations of a particular kind of reader, but it also underlines the fact that, for Stevenson, a particular kind of reader must come *before* a particular kind of text – the islander is not the hero, because the market has not evolved with the islander in mind.[187] The use of childhood as a trope in Stevenson's criticism is thus key to an understanding of his attitudes towards the pre-

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[187] This is not to say that casual racism is thus legitimated, but rather that the reader's desires might not cohere with a Feejee islander's. Stevenson did write for Samoan islanders later in his career and his approach illustrates a similar concern for readerly delight – 'The Bottle Imp' (1891) and 'The Isle of Voices' (1893) adopt a framework borrowed from the 'folk-tale structures' of Samoan oral culture and the latter tale was published in Samoan in *O Sulu Samoa* (May-December 1891). See Roslyn Jolly, 'Introduction' to Robert Louis Stevenson, *South Sea Tales* (OUP, 1996), p. xxvi.

emption of reader-response – the writer knows how to delight who remembers being delighted in childhood.

ii. Anti-mimesis: Stevenson and the romance text

'Popular Authors' suggests that genre is the natural effect of readers' desires as they have become apparent over time, rather than the determined effect of artistic ideals at work in a cultural vacuum. The essay thus makes explicit the origins of a genre whose aesthetic profile Stevenson had been attempting to raise, since the beginning of the decade. In his critical writings on the romance, Stevenson argued that the genre could be defined not only by its subject matter, but also by the view of reading that underlay the production of romance texts as commodities in a marketplace.

In 'A Gossip on Romance' (1882), for example, Stevenson reiterates the idea that the pleasure involved in the reading of a romantic narrative is comparable to the pleasures of a children's game: 'Fiction is to the grown man what play is to the child; it is there that he changes the atmosphere and tenor of his life'.[188] The 'Gossip' emphasises the romance's capacity to offer a 'change' from the 'atmosphere and tenor' of ordinary life. Yet, in constructing the romance-reader as a figure who craves a literature conspicuously different from the realities of everyday existence, the essay also sets up the idea of romance as a genre that thrives on an anti-mimesis which, in 'Popular Authors', Stevenson equates with the child's daydream. If the romance offers the reader an escape, then its particular flavour is defined by the kind of 'reality' from which that escape is offered.

This is Stevenson's point in 'A Humble Remonstrance' (1884), which suggests that all fiction is inescapably anti-mimetic. The essay was written in response to Henry

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[188] Stevenson, 'A Gossip on Romance' in *Memories and Portraits* (Glasgow: Richard Drew Publishing, 1990), pp. 172-90 (187). Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

James's 'The Art of Fiction' (1884), in which James argues that fiction should strive for a convincing illusion of reality. Stevenson begs to differ. Initially, he defends the romance as an example of a species of fiction that thrives upon its difference from reality and reiterates his point in the 'Gossip' about romance's capacity to offer an escape from the complexities of lived experience. While James 'misses what he calls the "immense luxury" of being able to quarrel with his author', Stevenson suggests that the luxury, for readers of romance, 'is to lay by our judgment, to be submerged by the tale as by a billow, and only to awake, and begin to distinguish and find fault, when the piece is over and the volume laid aside' (*Memories and Portraits*, 199). Stevenson moves on, however, to suggest that romance is not only just as aesthetically legitimate as realism, but also casts doubt upon the very ability of narrative prose finally to be realistic at all: 'No art – to use the daring phrase of Mr James – can successfully "compete with life"'. On the contrary: 'To "compete with life," whose sun we cannot look upon, whose passions and diseases waste and slay us – to compete with the flavour of wine, the beauty of the dawn, the scorching of fire, the bitterness of death and separation' is an impossible requirement of any kind of fiction:

> Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality. The arts, like arithmetic and geometry, turn away their eyes from the gross, coloured and mobile nature at our feet, and regard instead a certain figmentary abstraction. (*Memories and Portraits*, 195)

Stevenson objected to realistic depiction of life, therefore, not because such an endeavour was always undesirable, but because its proponents ignored the fact that it

was always illusory – something which, for him, rendered the heightened unreality of romance just as viable as the illusion of contemporary 'reality' striven for by realist authors. Narrative, especially fictional narrative, was one thing – life was quite another. Indeed, even historians are not immune, since their selection and rehearsal of events inevitably transforms history into story. For Stevenson, therefore, because literature is always *necessarily* governed by generic and stylistic conventions, the heightened conventionality that makes the romance so popular serves only to emphasise and carry to extremes the falsity inherent in all fiction.[189]

Stevenson's anti-mimetic position can be linked to the aestheticism that informs Wilde's writings, which similarly argue that, in terms of literary representation, 'truth' is 'a word of very debateable propriety' (*Memories and Portraits*, 195). As Stephen Arata points out: 'Aestheticist and romance fiction in the fin de siècle are alike in being reactionary movements […] marked by a turning away from the lived experience of the late-Victorian world'.[190] Stevenson advocated romance as a chance to escape to a counterworld of amoral action in which the complexity of ethical judgement could be suspended to satisfy the reader's 'demand for fit and striking incident'. For Stevenson, romance worked to elide psychological 'realities' to focus on action for action's sake: a genre 'which either does not regard the human will at all, or deals with it in obvious and healthy elations; where the interest turns, not upon what a man shall choose to do, but on how he manages to do it' (*Memories and Portraits*, 174-75). Wilde's writings similarly advocate the suspension of moral judgment and reject the realist's tiresome

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[189] For an insightful discussion of Stevenson's relationship with James see John Lyon, 'Stevenson and Henry James' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Penny Fielding (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 134-46. Lyon identifies, as I do, a profound distrust of the possibility of comprehensibly identifying 'the real' for fictional representation as the root of Stevenson's defence of romance. Moreover, he suggests, a latent doubt about realism's total mimetic effectiveness not only subtly undermines James's own claims for realism but also comes to characterise James's later critical writing.
[190] Stephen Arata, 'Realism' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle* ed. Gail Marshall (CUP, 2007), pp. 169-86 (182).

recourse to literature as truth. Indeed, Wilde expressed a clear preference for Stevenson's anti-mimetic, escapist romances to the engagement with political realities that he saw as characterising Stevenson's South Seas writings: 'In Gower Street Stevenson could have written a new *Trois Mousquetaires*. In Samoa he wrote letters to *The Times* about Germans' (*Letters*, 789).

Yet Stevenson's insistence that reading offered an escape from reality immediately differentiates him from Wilde. While both agree that art is always an abstraction or simplification, Wilde collapses life and art – the very binary that Stevenson's writing upholds – by insisting on the 'real' as a series of performances with no underlying meaning or significance. Like Wilde, Stevenson championed an individual's right to personal autonomy in matters of taste, morality and life choices.[191] Yet his insistence on the fundamental difference between life and art, which characterise Stevenson's aesthetic writing, also characterises the fundamental difference between himself and Wilde.

It could also be argued, however, that Stevenson's writings on the romance genre differentiate him from Wilde's aestheticism to the precise degree that Stevenson's romances differentiate themselves from the genre as he theorises it. Stevenson's fiction replicates romance's conventions and re-deploys them, metafictionally, as a signposted performance. As narrative texts, they draw attention to the very nature of literary genre as fundamentally a 'game' that readers and writers 'play', but they also draw attention to reading and writing as performances dictated by the literary market that governs the way in which texts are written, read and circulated. They announce themselves at every turn to be commodities within particular literary

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[191] This aspect of Stevenson's writing will be more fully addressed later in the chapter. For a full discussion, see also my own forthcoming article, 'Stevenson in *Scribner's*: ethics and romance in the literary marketplace', *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, Special issue: *Stevenson, Essayist*, ed. Richard Dury and R.L. Abrahamson (late 2012).

systems. Replete with reminders of their own status as artful constructions, Stevenson's romances insist, as Wilde's writings do not, that reading is always an escape. Dedicated to providing the reader with a chance to dream again as they had in childhood, they also remind the reader that the book, once shut, necessitates the end of dreaming in the face of 'the dazzle and confusion of reality'.

When *Treasure Island* first appeared in book form in 1883, for example, it was prefaced by a poem addressed 'To the Hesitating Purchaser'. In it, the novel is offered not as an original production, but as an 'old romance retold /exactly in the ancient way'. The author promises 'Storm and adventure, heat and cold […] schooners, islands, and maroons, / And buccaneers, and buried gold', elements which, he hopes, may 'please, as me they pleased of old'. Not only is the text announced from the outset as entirely conventional, but the narrative's conventional nature is also held up to be the very thing that will most appeal to the potential buyer – the buyer who recognizes the pleasures encoded in the elements of the plot here enumerated and who has already read the works of Ballantyne, Kingston and Cooper, who are mentioned by name as a point of comparison. The poem thus alerts the hesitating purchaser to the book's generic heritage, setting up the terms (the rules) of the game about to be played. At the same time, however, it exposes that game for what it is – a textual exercise fulfilling, for the reader, 'services he shall desire to have performed'. The poem, in short, alerts the potential buyer to the conditions upon which the novel-as-commodity is offered for sale, ensuring that the text never transcends the material concerns governing its production. It emphasises the role of supply and demand in the relationship between the author and the reader: that narrative has an economic as well as an aesthetic purpose.

'To the Hesitating Purchaser' betrays Stevenson's commitment to making romance – with its inbred appeal to the delights of action – contingent upon the reader's

recognition of a certain kind of authorial and generic performance by foregrounding the artificiality of the whole proceeding. Highlighting the game of romance as primarily a literary phenomenon, it celebrates, with his aesthetic essays, the excitement that romance narratives can engender, whilst simultaneously foregrounding the excitement of such narratives as part of an escapist reading experience that Stevenson, the literary tradesman, obligingly offers.

While Stevenson's essays certainly allow us to place his writings within the context of late-nineteenth-century debates about the relative merits of romance and realism, paratextual strategies like the preface to *Treasure Island* complicate his relationship to that debate even as they announce fairly conclusively his commitment to literary romance. His response to James does not posit (as did other late-Victorian defences of the romance) a binary opposition between the exotic, incident-heavy and fantastic plots of romance and the domestic occurrences, intricately-drawn characters and contemporary urban setting of realist fictions. In this respect, he differs from Andrew Lang, a major proponent of the romantic school of fiction, who defended the early novels of Stevenson and Rider Haggard in these terms:

> It has become undeniable that the love of adventure, and of mystery, and of a good fight lingers in the minds of men and women […] The moral is not that even the best boys' books are the highest class of fiction, but that there is still room for romance and a love of romance in civilised human nature.[192]

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[192] Andrew Lang, 'Realism and Romance', *Contemporary Review*, Vol. 52 (Nov 1887), 683-93 (692). Other references to this article appear in the body of the text. For an account of the late-Victorian romance/realism debate see Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900* (OUP, 1965), pp. 61-70 and Arata, 'Realism'. Edwin M. Eigner's discussion of Stevenson's relationship to the romance as theorised in the eighteenth century is historically useful, but the lack of any detailed discussion of the 'Gossip' and the 'Remonstrance' (which are briefly mentioned once) leads to some unconvincing conclusions. His almost exclusive focus on Stevenson's fiction, for example, leads him to identify the author with a romantic tradition in which 'the statement *about* life is primary; *then* comes the picture'

Lang's argument certainly coheres with Stevenson's in its presentation of 'boys' books' as works that exist in complete and conscious contrast to the realist novels of James and Dostoevsky (Lang's examples), but that in itself hardly renders them unworthy as literary productions. Nevertheless, it maintains the distinction that the one class of novelist offers fiction that is 'real' while the other does not. The main problem, for Lang, is that 'realism has a tendency to blink many things in life which are as real as jealous third-rate shrews and boozy press-men' – that the 'tendency of Realism in fiction is often to find the Unpleasant Real in character much more abundant than the Pleasant Real.'[193] In short, Lang objects to the kind of content realistically presented rather than questioning, as Stevenson does, the degree to which anything presented in narrative can ever be said to be represented truly at all (Lang, 687).

For Stevenson, therefore, the romance emphasises and carries to extremes the falsity inherent in all fiction, which is always *necessarily* governed by literary convention. While Lang echoes Stevenson's insistence that romance fulfils the legitimate escapist desires of many readers, he sees those desires as innately atavistic and equates their elision with unfaithfulness to the 'real' of human nature. Stevenson, however, sees romance as a genre that reconnects readers not with innate, atavistic urges, but with memories of games learnt in childhood and enshrined in related reading experiences. Ultimately, Stevenson objected to realistic depiction of life not because such an endeavour was undesirable, but because he thought it impossible. Narrative, especially fictional narrative, was one thing – life was quite another.

(Edwin M. Eigner, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Romantic Tradition* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966], p. 19). Yet this suggestion does not cohere with Stevenson's insistence, in his essays, that romance must be seen primarily as an escape from 'reality'. In fact, Stevenson's romances more often comment not on life, but on the way in which the genre falsifies lived experience in order to facilitate readerly 'delight'.

[193] Lang, p. 101

Stevenson's conception of romance is implicitly and self-consciously metafictional and intertextual. Moreover, the self-conscious display of metafictions and intertexts, which, I will argue, characterises Stevenson's romances, are made necessary by an equally present danger that readers might become so 'immersed' in a romanticised version of the world that they lose sight of the very real dilemmas that govern events as they are actually experienced in reality. They thus contain an implicit, built-in reminder of the 'Humble Remonstrance's message: 'phantom reproductions of experience, even at their most acute, convey decided pleasure; while experience itself, in the cockpit of life, can torture and slay' (*Memories and Portraits*, 196). By foregrounding the conditions of the escapist reading experience that the text offers as, specifically, a commodity – the manufactured product of an author-tradesman – Stevenson constantly reminds readers of the falsifications that legitimate romance and romanticisation within the special conditions of a literary genre founded upon a child's game and commodified in a literary marketplace. In doing so, the romance (and the impulse to romanticise) is safely differentiated from the 'real' from which it facilitates only a temporary escape.

iii. Romanticisation and metafictionality: *An Inland Voyage* (1878)

Stevenson's first book, *An Inland Voyage* dramatises the troubling incompatibility between the romanticisation underpinning readerly delight and the more complex dilemmas attendant on lived experience. The book is ostensibly a record of a series of actions or incidents that actually occurred.[194] Its self-conscious presentation of the journey as a retrospective narrative, however, succeeds initially in eliding the voyage as a physical experience, turning instead upon the impressionistic reactions of its author to

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[194] The book is an account of a canoe journey from Antwerp to Pontoise, which Stevenson undertook in the summer of 1876, in the company of Walter Simpson.

events, people and places which are, arguably, unremarkable in themselves. Here we have a record of an actual physical endurance test which, when narrated, becomes less about the physical test itself and more about the way such physicality is reconfigured for the reader's pleasure.

In the early stages of the book, Stevenson offers a model for what follows when he covets the nomadic existence of the bargee. '[S]uch a life,' he writes enviously, 'is both to travel and to stay at home':

> [I]t is merely as if he were listening to another man's story or turning the leaves of a picture-book in which he had no concern. He may take his afternoon walk in some foreign country on the banks of the canal, and then come home to dinner at his own fireside.[195]

This use of reading as a metaphor for travel recalls the book's preface, in which Stevenson notes: 'this voyage of ours is going into a cheap edition'. Travel literature always involves some amount of reconstruction, selection and narration in order to evoke the journey that is its subject, but there is a literal ring to Stevenson's assertion. The preface foregrounds reading as a 'voyage' that never goes further than the perusal of 'a cheap edition' – a voyage which might offer an imaginary escape from the material confines of the moment of reading, but which always begins and ends with the physical book. From the outset, Stevenson's invitation 'to follow in my steps' is undermined by a reminder that the reader's transport never escapes the material conditions of the reading moment (*An Inland Voyage*, 3).

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[195] Stevenson, *An Inland Voyage* (1878) in *Travels With a Donkey, An Inland Voyage, The Silverado Squatters*, ed. Trevor Royle (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), pp. 1-105 (14). Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

If it is impossible for readers physically ensconced by their firesides simultaneously to be travelling down a canal in France, then they might at least enjoy the imaginative experience of such a journey by reading the author's account. In the preface, however, Stevenson reminds readers that this is not a slavishly faithful record of the physical voyage, but the deliberate creation of that entity, 'the writer', who 'must show himself for a moment in the portico' of the text – a metaphor that emphasises the construction of text as of a building. If the book is a commodity – the voyage narrated in a 'cheap edition' – then the preface emphasises that it is not the travels themselves that are being offered, but the narrator's particular attitude to the objective facts of travel. Certainly, Stevenson's unashamedly impressionistic account exhibits a pleasure, which the reader is invited to share, in the romantic embellishment of experience. At the same time, however, the book's inevitable swapping of the physical act of travel for the imaginative act of reading is always in the foreground.

Stevenson's account largely eschews physical detail to explore the ways in which travellers (himself included) reconcile themselves to, and imaginatively contain, the peculiarities of the individuals they encounter and the places in which they find themselves. It also emphasises the immense pleasure that can be derived from imagining lived experience to be conditioned by the kind of generic conventions that abound in fiction. Fishermen and anglers are revered, for instance, not because of any charm inherent in their occupation (Stevenson does not 'affect fishes unless when cooked in sauce') but because 'an angler is an important piece of river scenery, and hence deserves some recognition among canoeists'. Such figures are an essential part of Stevenson's imagined conception of the scene; the picture *ought* to include anglers, whose 'quiet presence serves to accentuate the solitude and stillness, and remind you of the glittering citizens below your boat' (*An Inland Voyage*, 27). It helps Stevenson

successfully to play the part of the traveller, deserving 'some recognition' simply because it is the sort of thing which a 'canoeist' would recognise.

A delight in the apparent incursion of fiction into reality permeates the early part of the book. It is to be found, for example, in Stevenson and his companion's treatment at the hands of a group of children to whom, he imagines, they 'were plainly a pair of *Bluebeards*' (*An Inland Voyage*, 29). In a later encounter with some girls, to whom Stevenson recounts his experience of near-drowning to rapt attention, he exaggerates the episode to Shakespearean proportions: 'It was *Othello* over again, with no less than three *Desdemonas* and a sprinkling of sympathetic senators in the background' (*An Inland Voyage*, 57; italics in original). The artifice that transforms the story of a fairly ordinary journey into a romance with Stevenson as the central character is foregrounded, emphasising the narrative's focus on the author's subjective impressions over and above the situations in which he finds himself. Such a strategy refrains from providing a faithful evocation of the journey's physical conditions, presenting the reader instead with the impressions of the traveller-as-author. It emphasises the opportunities for imaginative play afforded by travel and alerts the reader to the pleasure inherent in these romantic embellishments of actual experience. By emphasising Stevenson's role as a protagonist in his own narrative, not only does the text become as much about the imaginative interpretation of experience as the physical experience itself, it also employs this self-awareness as a deliberate means of overcoming the discrepancy between travel as a physical act and the position of the reader imaginatively experiencing the journey at second-hand. In this way, Stevenson's self-awareness tends self-consciously towards readerly 'delight', ensuring that the physical book becomes the medium by which the reader is able, imaginatively, 'both to travel and to stay at home'.

Yet, having established the narrative as an invitation to the imaginative embellishment of lived experience and an acknowledgment of the pleasure afforded thereby, *An Inland Voyage* also illustrates how this approach can become morally dubious when it strays beyond the confines of the imaginative exercise and encroaches on lived experience. Arriving in the town of Pont-sur-Sambe, Stevenson and Simpson are mistaken for peddlars. In its presentation of this episode, the text initially points once more to the pleasures afforded by the imaginary alienation from the self facilitated by the defamiliarising effect of travel in a foreign country. Not only can Stevenson begin romantically to occupy the role of a pedlar in a French village, but the locals 'began to think we might be pedlars after all'. There is a degree of humour to the statement, to be sure, but the completeness of the illusion on the villagers' part is striking: 'These Hainaulters could see no difference between us and the average pedlar' (*An Inland Voyage*, 31). Whilst the illusion is maintained, 'Stevenson the pedlar' ceases to be a self-consciously imagined embellishment – to all intents and purposes it is also a material fact.

Initially pleasurable as an imaginative exercise, this confusion of imagination with lived experience soon becomes unsettling. Despite the unpleasant conditions of the inn and the culinary adversity of the 'tough beefsteak' they are served, Stevenson takes refuge in the role he has been offered: 'I tried to make believe that I was amused with the adventure, tough beefsteak and all.' Ultimately, however, he admits the reprehensibility of make-believe in this particular situation:

> [It was] against the etiquette of the universe – to sit at the same table and pick your own superior diet from among their crusts […] I had not seen such a thing done since the greedy boy at school with his birthday cake. It was odious

enough to witness, I could remember; and I had never thought to play the part myself. But there again you see what it is to be a pedlar. (*An Inland Voyage*, 32)

In this episode, the sustained adoption of a role, which affords Stevenson great pleasure elsewhere, merely serves to disguise the moral repercussions of falsely depriving a poorer family of their precious victuals – an action which remains, however one recasts it imaginatively, 'against the etiquette of the universe'. A false identity is the only means of making such an action in any way justifiable. But for Stevenson, who, unlike like Doctor Jekyll, is unable physically to retain two different identities at once, the unethical nature of this falsity is inescapable.

Despite the undeniable pleasure this constant make-believe affords, it is an effort that the narrative is unable to sustain beyond this episode. As the pair approach Landrecies, imagination fails to overcome the insistent reality of physical discomfort, which breeds a taste for 'the real', a resurgence of 'authentic' identity and a retreat from the exercise of imagination: 'the rain still fell and the wind still blew; but we found a double-bedded room with plenty of furniture, real water-jugs with real water in them, and dinner: a real dinner, not innocent of real wine' (*An Inland Voyage*, 41). There is, therefore, an ethical dimension to Stevenson's initial emphasis on the materiality of his first book, which draws the reader into the imaginative pleasures afforded by travel only to demonstrate the inherent offence against the etiquette of the universe involved in just such a readerly engagement. The life of the bargee, like the life of the armchair traveller, may be pleasurable, but to encounter such things in a book is to be always 'listening to another man's story or turning the leaves of a picture-book in which he had no concern'. Episodes such as that of the pedlar remind him, as they remind Stevenson the narrator/traveller, 'that he is not a traveller everywhere, and that his journey is no

more than a siesta by the way on the real march of life' (*An Inland Voyage*, 93). In thus drawing attention to the discrepancy between the real and the narrated, Stevenson also demonstrates the fundamental difference between experience and reading – between the world and the book. He suggests, moreover, that the difference is important not only in terms of the aesthetics, but also the ethics of narrative.

In a recent study, Glenda Norquay considers Stevenson's assertion that his works were those of 'a literary vagrant'.[196] Such an image, she suggests, is analogous to Michel de Certeau's idea of the 'reader as traveller', which identifies reading as a process in which the reader appropriates an author's texts according to his or her own, deeply individual, situation: 'he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralises himself into it like the internal rumblings of one's body […] Words become the outlet or product of silent histories. […] A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place'.[197] De Certeau's model, Norquay argues, allows for a fluid interpretative method that 'avoids fixity of the text or of the reading process, allowing the reader agency without mastery'.[198] Stevenson, she suggests, bases his understanding of the reader's habits on a similar theory of individual appropriation. Rather than set himself apart as an authority on matters of literary interpretation, his critical writings draw upon his own reading experiences in a manner that emphasises their fundamentally subjective and individual nature. They are 'characterised by the absolute specificity' of the reading experience: 'the moment one summer evening when he first discovered he loves reading, perusing fairy-tales while walking into the village on an errand; or reading

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[196] Stevenson, *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (1882), quoted in Glenda Norquay, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Theories of Reading: The Reader as Vagabond* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 3.
[197] Michel de Certeau, quoted in Norquay, pp. 10-11.
[198] Norquay, p. 11.

Dumas on a winter's night in the Pentland hills'.[199] Drawing on his own experience of

reading, his writings aim to '[t]ranslate authorial recollection and past enthusiasm into

present readerly enjoyment'.[200]

An Inland Voyage provides an insight into how Stevenson not only imagines

such specific conditions as always central to reading, but also theorises the impact of

such inevitable specification upon the reader's experience of textuality. It employs the

metaphor of reading as travel to explain how the work really can offer a literary escape,

whilst simultaneously emphasising the limitations of the reader's imaginary journey by

pointing constantly to the specific material conditions that always enshrine it.

Emphasising the specific conditions that govern the reader's individualised encounter

with the book, therefore, An Inland Voyage also points to the fact that the appropriation

of text begins and ends with the material conditions that govern reading and which

reading never succeeds in demolishing. It does not posit, as Wilde does in his aesthetic

essays, an unbroken distinction between textuality and reality: in Stevenson's

formulation, the latter always precedes and directs the former.

Norquay's study is a useful example of the way in which Stevenson criticism

has benefited from the work of book historians and their focus upon the way in which

the conditions inherent upon each moment of reading impact in the ways in which texts

are interpreted. In arguing not only that a similar acknowledgment lay at the heart of

Stevenson's theory of fiction, but also that his reader-centric understanding of

professional authorship impacted upon the way in which his own fiction was written,

her work places the author's commitment to 'the theorisation of the reading process' at

the centre of her understanding of Stevenson's works. She invites us to view the author

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[199] Ibid. p. 6; the instances in question occur in *Rosa Qui Locorum* (1893) and 'A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas's' (1887) respectively.
[200] Certeau, quoted in Norquay, p. 11.

as 'less interested in romance's envisioning of a brave new world or its timeless appeal than in the power it had upon the individual reader who succumbs to it'.[201]

Norquay's examination of Stevenson's essay 'My First Book' (1894), however, raises an important paradox that must be dealt with in any examination of Stevenson's outlook on popular fiction and mass-reading practices. In that essay, Stevenson discusses the composition of *Treasure Island*, acknowledging its debt to other literary sources. For Norquay, however, the essay is less than frank, demonstrating an unwillingness to acknowledge the tale's true origins in the recollection of joyful childhood encounters with penny serials by Hayward, Bracebridge Hemyng and the like. The essay acknowledges 'possible sources of plagiarism, and repetition of published material', locating the text 'in a pattern of familiarity and repetition, the very source of "popular" pleasures', demonstrating 'how well known the elements of his own yarn were'.[202] At the same time, however, *Treasure Island* is presented as 'different from these sources', because it 'arose from individual inspiration'. Thus, argues Norquay, Stevenson can be seen clearly to be 'working within two very different aesthetic modes, two different regimes of value':

> [T]he 'cultural value' of the novel was indeed being calculated in terms of opposition to other texts, set apart by its breaking of expectations, by the way it complicated rather than simplified. In other words it was being defined by the familiar strategies deployed to separate high culture from the popular.[203]

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[201] Norquay, p. 73.
[202] Ibid. p. 11.
[203] Ibid. p. 174.

Implicit in this argument is the suggestion that Stevenson's romances, as well as his critical writings, construct his own fictional output as a conscious *re*-writing of the kind of fiction celebrated in 'Popular Authors', which serves to differentiate his own work from the commercially popular literature celebrated in that earlier essay. Drawing attention to his exploitation of the 'pattern[s] of familiarity and repetition' on display in the works of which *Treasure Island* is an avowed imitation, Stevenson also demonstrates the comparative sophistication of his own works in a manner that undermines the aesthetic arguments which he himself uses, in 'Popular Authors', to defend the productions of penny paper contributors on their own terms. For Norquay this constitutes a 'duality of focus' in Stevenson's defence of romance: however defensive Stevenson appears to be of commercial and escapist forms of literature and however much his criticism strives to demonstrate the aesthetic integrity both of writing for a mass-market and of accepting the literature of the masses on its own aesthetic terms, his artistic theories still reflect contemporary concerns surrounding the implications of writing for a literary marketplace in which financial remuneration did not necessarily correlate with aesthetic success. This leads to a dilemma, whereby his expression of 'anxieties common to writers of his time about the doubtful nature of popularity and the tension between consumers' acclaim and aesthetic success' conflicts with his vision of 'pleasure and the fulfilment of a reader's wants as key to understanding the nature of literary activity'.[204]

I would argue, however, that Norquay is in danger of over-emphasising the ambivalence of Stevenson's attitude to popular success. While it is important to read Stevenson's commitment to 'the fulfilment of a reader's wants' in the context of 'the tension between consumer's acclaim and aesthetic success', it is misleading to suggest

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[204] Ibid. p. 5.

that such an outlook represents a 'duality of focus'.[205] Such a suggestion implies that anxieties about popular success and the desire to fulfil consumer expectations exist in mutual opposition to each other as forces governing the production of Stevenson's texts. In fact, as the essay on 'Popular Authors' demonstrates, far from constituting separate impulses pulling the author in contradictory directions, Stevenson's definitions of aesthetic and popular success not only complement each other, but are reconciled within a kind of popular text that *recognises* its own status as a literary commodity offering the reader a clearly delineated reading experience. For Stevenson, the 'delight' of the romance text represents an 'ironic' enjoyment founded on a conscious performance of authorship, which invites an equally self-conscious attitude on the part of the reader, who is asked to adopt a particular kind of pose in relation to the work – a sort of 'guilty pleasure' in which the guilt is mitigated by a frank admission of the relationship between the author-as-tradesman and the reader-as-consumer.

In *Kidnapped* (1886), for example, Stevenson's dedication to Charles Baxter makes clear that the author is very much aware of the kind of text he is engaged in writing: 'This is no furniture for the scholar's library, but a book for the winter evening school-room when the tasks are over and the hour for bed draws near'. Alan Breck, in this context, 'has no more desperate purpose than to steal some young gentleman's attention from his Ovid' and 'carry him awhile into the Highlands and the last century'. Like the prefatory poem to *Treasure Island*, it signals to the reader the kind of reading experience that he or she is to expect and, indicating the mode in which the text is to be appreciated, points to the role the reader is expected to adopt. Both texts emphasise their status as the agents of a particular kind of reading experience so that aesthetic

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[205] Ibid.

success and readerly acclaim become the same thing – both are collapsed into the ability to appeal successfully to the imagination of a young boy.

Yet it cannot be denied that Stevenson's anxieties about his debt to such mass-market authors as Hemyng and Hayward were very real, nor that they palpably underscore his writings. Norquay is right to point out that Stevenson's fiction, though indebted to the works of his favourite 'popular authors', also constitutes a more sophisticated re-writing of those tales in a manner that implies at once a celebration of their work and a conscious need to differentiate his own output from theirs. Nevertheless, Norquay exaggerates the extent to which Stevenson's anxieties stem from a need to prove that his own writing contains an extra germ of originality, preventing it from being merely a rehash of something that wasn't very good to begin with. In fact, Stevenson's anxieties about the nature of popular success did not necessarily emanate from an ingrained sense of the inferiority of popular forms of fiction, nor of fiction geared towards entertaining the reader. It is my contention, however, that while Stevenson's writing does differentiate itself from the sources he openly emulates the nature of the imitated sources is, finally, less important or problematic than the consequences of imitation itself.

iv. Anxieties of influence

As the 'Humble Remonstrance' demonstrates, Stevenson sees literature as fundamentally an imitation, distinctly and inescapably separate from any emulated 'real'. To enjoy literature is to abandon a complex and infinitely faceted reality, in favour of a simplified abstraction. The heightened fantasies of romance narratives provide a reading experience whose pleasure is grounded in an engagement with a self-evidently 'assembled' set of generic devices, expected by readers and assigned by the

marketplace within which the author works. Yet, the admission that romance depends upon an adherence to convention (for the author) and an immersion in improbable incident (for the reader) poses an ethical dilemma for Stevenson. For, if his literary criticism establishes and celebrates the fact that all literature depends on convention, elsewhere he is equally eloquent in his expressions of loathing for conformity.

The essay, 'On the Choice of a Profession' (c. 1879), positively nihilistic in its attack on the validity of convention in the form of 'received wisdom', is a potent example of this loathing.[206] In response to a young man's request for advice on the eponymous topic, Stevenson's reply is less than encouraging: 'I fear I can only tell you that the wise, in these circumstances, act upon no principles whatever.' More than simply a condemnation of 'the wise', the argument attacks conventional concepts of 'wisdom' itself, exposing them as sham constructions dependent upon a network of received fallacies. Taking, as an example, a hypothetical young man who works in a bank, Stevenson enquires into the forces that contrived to place him there:

> The fellow was hardly in trousers before they whipped him into school; hardly done with school before they smuggled him into an office; it is ten to one they have had him married into the bargain; and all this before he has had time so much as to imagine that there may be any other practicable course. (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 14)

Received wisdom is the process by which 'any other practicable course' is rejected in favour of a course chosen by others and forcibly thrust upon one. It is likened to a

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[206] Stevenson wrote the essay in 1879. It was offered for publication to the *Cornhill*, but rejected, finally appearing in *Scribner's*, 57 (January 1915), 66-69.

taming process, a flattening of possibility by which 'the wild ass's colt is broken in; and now sits diligently scribbling' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 14-15).

What begins as an analysis of the ways in which lifestyle choices are made ends with an explicit declaration of cultural relativity and the influence of native tradition in a particular individual's mode of life. All manners, customs, occupations, as well as the conventions that govern their selection are exposed as actually ambivalent insofar as their intrinsic value is concerned: 'geography is a considerable part of orthodoxy; […] a man who, when born in London, makes a conscientious Protestant, would have made an equally conscientious Hindu if he had first seen daylight in Benares' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 16). It is therefore difficult, when choosing a profession, to defer to duty, or the desire to do good: such 'principles' are so contingent as to melt into air as soon as they are examined closely. The subversive truth is that '[t]o "do good in the world"' is merely 'to be received into a society' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 17) and has little, if anything, to do with the intrinsic worth of one specific action or decision. In the end, therefore, '[i]t will probably not much matter what you decide upon doing; for most men seem to sink at length to the degree of stupor necessary for contentment in their different estates' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 19). Development, the essay suggests, is always imitative and thus always an exercise in conformity. Imitation, celebrated elsewhere by Stevenson as the cornerstone of his theory of art, is to be abhorred in this context because it inevitably leads to stagnation.

Yet, if Stevenson's work consequently exhibits both an adoration and a denunciation of convention, the dilemma cannot simply be dismissed as the self-deprecation of an author demeaningly forced into writing (or even 'diligently scribbling') for a mass-audience. After all, Stevenson's writing also endorses the idea that literary worth should be judged according to its ability to please those who read it –

something he himself admits that *Treasure Island* failed to do. In fact, the 'duality of focus' detected by Norquay in Stevenson's literary outlook, is ascribable not simply to his ideas about what literature *is*, but rather to his anxieties about what it has the potential to *do*. For his aesthetic writings, which entail a celebration of the reader's capacity to 'immerse' themselves in an action-packed narrative engagingly related according to familiar conventions, also involve a problematic deference to the influence of 'received ideas' – a trait for which, elsewhere, Stevenson professes abhorrence. The result is a profound anxiety about the influence of literature, which permeates and informs his work.

In 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters' (1881), for example, Stevenson emphasised the professional writer's ethical responsibilities: 'even in the humblest sort of literary work, we have it in our power either to do great harm or great good'. This was because '[t]he total of a nation's reading' was at least partly constitutive of 'the efficient educational medium of youth' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 54):

> Those who write have to see that each man's knowledge is, as near as they can make it, answerable to the facts of life; that he shall not suppose himself an angel or a monster; nor take this world for a hell; nor be suffered to imagine that all rights are concentrated in his own caste or country, or all veracities in his own parochial creed. (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 55)

This evocation of the 'facts of life' is, in fact, a subversion of the idea that life can ever be reduced to 'facts' at all. The only plain 'fact' in evidence in this passage is that things are rarely one way or another; one caste does not hold 'all the rights' and one man is seldom merely an 'angel or a monster'. The duty of the author is to show how

things are rarely that simple. Accordingly, the cohesion of self-evident 'facts' is rejected in favour of a negotiation between them. By pointing out that a 'fact' is always susceptible to complication, the passage demonstrates the one fact that can be trusted: namely, that knowledge is not the same as resolution, but fluctuates continually depending on one's point of view. It is imperative, therefore, that a young person read as widely as possible in order to obtain as rounded a view of the 'facts' as possible: 'even if a fact shall discourage or corrupt him, it is still best that he should know it'. The young person must learn, in its totality, the complications of 'this world as it is', rather than let himself be mesmerised by the deceptive ideal of 'a world made easy by educational suppressions'. After all, it is in a world free of such suppressions 'that he must win his way to shame or glory' (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 56).

It is difficult to reconcile such a sentiment with 'A Humble Remonstrance'. That essay not only insists that literature is always 'a simplification of some side or point of life' (*Memories and Portraits*, 205-206), but also celebrates this deceptive simplification for its pleasure-giving qualities. One finds the same tension in 'Popular Authors'. On the one hand, the essay celebrates the pleasure to be found in the self-evidently preposterous tales of Stephens Hayward, true to the familiar conventions of the penny adventure serial and 'the cheap press', but hardly reliable as an account of adventures ever likely to be encountered by most readers. On the other hand, such tales as these, though fit for emulation by the author who wishes to entertain, also exert, by dint of that very power, a potent and very real influence over the reader – an influence whose consideration is of 'grave importance'. After all, the young sailor, whose meeting with Stevenson forms the occasion for the essay, has allowed himself to become so immersed in Stephens Hayward's *Tom Holt's Log* (1868) that a mistaken

belief in the veracity of its plot has changed his life forever by influencing his decision to take to the seas:

> He cannot make a tale of his own life […] It is not this that he considers in his rare hours of rumination, but that other life, which was all lit up for him, by the humble talent of a Hayward – that other life which, God knows, perhaps he still believes that he is leading – the life of Tom Holt. (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 32)

'A Humble Remonstrance' demonstrates Stevenson's commitment to the idea of the book as a commodity that offered its possessor an escape into 'that other life' – a world governed by the 'significant simplicity' of narrative conventions. Yet, the case of *Tom Holt's Log* demonstrates the difficulties posed for one such as Stevenson, who enthusiastically both consumed and produced escapist stories of adventure. Literary texts, even those that purport to represent real occurrences, present the reader with worlds and lives governed by recognisable conventions and are thus reducible to 'facts' in a manner that fundamentally differentiates them from lived experience. As with the oracles that govern the young man's 'Choice of a Profession', they replace the vagaries of life as it is lived with pre-conceived ideas of life as it might ideally be, creating a reductive image. The result is a conflict between the idea of convention as an underlying feature of literary texts and convention as the tyrannical ruler of lived experience. While the simplification facilitated by the romance's heightened conventionality – the familiarity of its rules – forms the basis of a particular kind of literary enjoyment, this very quality is nevertheless in danger of deceiving the impressionable reader with a simplification that is as false as it is aesthetically

'significant'. In order to demonstrate the ways in which Stevenson overcame this dilemma, the remainder of this chapter will analyse Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *The Black Arrow* (1883) in their original material contexts both as books and as serials in the children's magazine, *Young Folks*.

As Norquay has indicated, there is a comparison to be made between Stevenson's idea of a reader's total immersion in a fictional text and de Certeau's theory of readers as 'poachers', appropriating texts according not only to their individual situation, but also according to the particular nature of each individual moment of reading. This endless capacity for the commingling of text with individual experience, however, is rendered problematic in light of the intense anxiety surrounding the question of influence so bitterly set forth in 'On the Choice of a Profession'. For if readers appropriate texts for themselves and transform them in their own image, then the reverse must also hold true – that readers are themselves inevitably transformed by their textual encounters, just as the young man in search of a profession is inevitably moulded by a knowledge and appropriation of other people's experiences. Thus, even though Stevenson differs from Wilde in his refusal to collapse the boundaries between fictional genres and lived experience, he shares Wilde's anxiety about the way in which books can come to enshrine, for readers, the 'reality' it actually refracts through specific mimetic traditions.

Romance's potential damagingly to equip readers with a reductive (even a false) view of lived experience is especially troubling in light of the proposed amorality of the romance text. Piracy, kidnap, duels and war: these turbulent experiences, 'robbed of their vivacity and sting' are tolerable and almost always agreeable when presented in fiction. As mere 'phantom reproductions of experience' they are able, 'even at their most acute, [to] convey decided pleasure; while experience itself, in the cockpit of life,

can torture and slay.' The ability of the reader 'to lay by' his judgment for the duration

of the textual encounter is fundamental, therefore, to the enjoyment of the events for

their own sake: a gesture devoid of any other consideration than the exhilarating

pleasure their textual representation is able to convey. Ethically, however, it is

important that the reader is made aware that delight in the text's events, along with the

pleasures attendant upon 'immersion' within them, only remains legitimate within a

fictional framework: that the 'obvious and healthy elations' of the human will require,

for their capacity to delight, equally 'obvious' artistic embellishments (*Memories and*

Portraits, 174).

Thus, if Stevenson's works pre-empt the reader's individual appropriation of the

text, as de Certeau argues, it is only with the ultimate aim of defusing dangerous acts of

textual appropriation, of policing the barrier between fiction and reality, between life

and text. Narratives like Hayward's might well be in danger of sending a young reader

to sea in emulation, as he appropriates the text into the narrative of his own life to the

extent that fiction and reality are dangerously and misguidedly combined. Stevenson's

texts, however, are determined to foreground the reading experience as precisely that –

an immersion in exciting narrative incidents that only remains ethically and mimetically

legitimate while the game of textual consumption is still in play.

Throughout Stevenson's romances, therefore, the reader is confronted with the

fictionality of the narrative, underlining the intrinsically artificial conditions required to

render the brutal realities of romantic action aesthetically pleasing. While the text

courts the reader's pleasurable submersion by the book 'as by a billow', readers are

never allowed to lose sight of the conditions of their engagement with the text and,

consequently, of the conditions of literary mimesis in general. Such an approach

eschews the potentially dangerous simplification that nevertheless characterises

romantic composition by drawing attention to the necessity of that simplification in the construction of narrative events: by emphasising the work as a commodity grounded in the provision of certain pleasurable falsifications of experience. Ultimately, Stevenson's romances anticipate and dramatise reader response in order to defuse the dangerous possibility of a too-ready identification with fictional action.

In the early stages of *Kidnapped*, for instance, David Balfour attributes his uncle's strange behaviour, realistically enough, to the notion that the older man is suffering from insanity. At the same time, he cannot help but entertain a more fantastic notion, akin to 'a story like some ballad I had heard folk singing, of a poor lad that was a rightful air and a wicked kinsman that tried to keep him from his own' (*Kidnapped*, 26). That the latter explanation turns out to be the true one only serves to remind the reader of the status of 'truth' in the romance narrative. If such a fantastic explanation is not remotely out of place in a romantic story, then it should also be noted that thus drawing attention to its preposterousness serves implicitly to question the quality of truth in narrative. The validity of the romance narrative as a site in which such ideas can be pleasurably entertained is never compromised, yet the reader is made aware of the terms on which the tale is offered. Later on, Alan's impromptu ballad on the battle being fought in the round-house ensures that the events are enacted as already-legendary, in the same way that David's experiences at the hands of his uncle are already 'like a ballad'. David's insistence that, despite the ballad's focus on Breck, he himself played a part in the battle, demonstrates a similar concern with the way in which the actual historical fact will eventually be presented as narrative history. In short, the battle is enacted and narrated in such a way that its possibility for retrospective transformation into a romantic narrative becomes almost the very reason for its occurring in the first place, enabling Breck retrospectively to look upon it as 'a

bonny story… Fifteen tarry sailors on the one side, and a man and a halfling boy upon the other!' (*Kidnapped*, 75)

Stevenson took to heart the idea that adventure stories operated on a level of mimesis governed by literary conventions that were themselves responsive to the demands of the readers' imaginations. Moreover, he viewed the author as complicit in satisfying readerly desire for certain kinds of narrative development. What becomes clear from an example like the roundhouse episode in *Kidnapped*, however, is the way in which his romances are keen to emphasise and draw attention to that complicity, enabling the text itself to enact an implicit commentary upon the naivety of literary 'realism', in a manner that both demonstrates and celebrates the intrinsic falsity of literary representation. To this extent, they exemplify a view expressed by Stevenson's 'Morality of the Profession of Letters':

> The subject makes but a trifling part of any piece of literature, [but] this spirit in which a subject is regarded, important in all kinds of literary work, becomes all-important in works of fiction, meditation, or rhapsody; for there it not only colours but itself chooses the facts; not only modifies but shapes the work. (*Essays Literary and Critical*, 57)

In drawing attention to the way in which such acts of authorial selection and embellishment are demanded by the genre in play, Stevenson's romances (like his travel writings) signal themselves as the authored constructions they really are. Such an emphasis upon the emphatic falsity of literary romance also serves an ethical purpose, however, highlighting the terms on which the fiction is offered as a reading experience

that involves taking pleasure in actions morally untenable beyond the moment of reading itself.

A similar strategy is at work in *Treasure Island*, in which the prefaratory poem posits the ensuing tale as a kind of Ghost of Reading Experience Past – a medium by which the reader could re-engage with fondly-remembered scenes of pleasurable literary engagement. It establishes the novel as the continuation of a romantic tradition founded upon a delightful immersion in uncomplicated formality: an 'old romance' would be 'retold / Exactly in the ancient way'. The poem reconfigures the novel's narrative as a greatest hits package designed to reconnect the reader not only with the kinds of stories the tale openly references, but also with the (specifically personal) experience of reading those tales. To this end, the novel constantly makes conditional the fulfilment of a specific kind of tale by emphasising both the conventions of past works and of childish imagination. On the one hand, such features allow the reader to recognise the narrative's generic features as those belonging to a specific kind of story whose familiarity ensures an appropriate (and desired) response. On the other hand, the prefatory poem foreshadows a tendency, in the ensuing narrative, to draw attention to these generic (and desired) features. The way in which the events of the novel unfold draws attention to the terms according to which the novel has been written, emphasising the process of its narrative construction, not just as a work of imaginative fiction, but as the fulfilment of a particular readerly desire. It is a metafictional strategy that undermines the escape it appears to offer, constantly underlining the intrinsic falsity of the generic certainties that make possible that escape: emphasising, at every turn, the narrative's status as a commodity quite as manufactured as the physical book that contains it.

From its earliest stages, the narrative of *Treasure Island* is caught up in the idea of stories and their influence on impressionable minds. Jim notes how his imagination is kindled by Billy Bones's map, leading him to dream about the adventures that the depicted island might hold:

> I approached that island in my fancy, from every possible direction; I explored every acre of its surface […] but in all my fancies, nothing occurred to me so strange and tragic as our actual adventures.[207]

The passage is a meditation on the power of the imaginative faculty brought into play in the act of immersing oneself in a romantic narrative. The map, like the book, evokes exciting images of 'the most wonderful and changing prospects' that will soon become a reality for Jim. If the ensuing adventure is a child's dream made manifest, however, the text dramatises the problematic relationship between the impulses of the imagination at play over an intriguing text and the physical and psychological horrors that characterise the 'strange and tragic' nature of such adventures in reality.

Like the young sailor in 'Popular Authors', Jim longs for the sea as a consequence of the pleasure he finds in an imaginative engagement with a romantic text. For the reader of *Treasure Island*, of course, Jim's 'strange and tragic' adventures themselves form the substance of the main body of a romantic text. Their presentation at the outset as, in actuality, 'strange and tragic', therefore, defuses their potentially dangerous effect on the reader by emphatically warning of the disparity between the 'delight' of literary romance and 'actual' reality. After all, the monstrous Long John

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[207] Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 37. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

Silver shares Jim's romantic ideals of island exploration, wishing that he could participate in the young man's experiences:

> 'You'll bathe, and you'll climb trees, and you'll hunt goats, you will; and you'll get aloft on them hills like a goat yourself. Why it makes me young again. I was going to forget my timber leg, I was. It's a pleasant thing to be young, and have ten toes, and you may lay to that.'

The symmetry between his own ideals and Silver's causes Jim some discomfort. As his own daydreams are recalled in Silver's recollection of his own childhood imaginings he can 'scarce conceal a shudder when he laid his hand upon my arm' (*Treasure Island*, 63). Little wonder since, this time, the imagined vision of boyish adventure is not occasioned by a textual representation, safely perused in domestic comfort. Rather, it is occasioned by Jim's arrival upon a real island, in a ship vessel that is itself embroiled in a bloody mutiny. The difference between romance as imaginatively constituted and romance as experienced 'in actuality' is troublingly apparent – and Jim can 'scarce conceal a shudder' at the disparity. The 'cruelty, duplicity and power' attributed to Silver, therefore, is also the 'cruelty, duplicity and power' of romance itself. The 'hesitating purchaser' should beware, as his desire for a certain kind of romantic engagement (the very grounds on which the book has been offered) is subverted by association not just with the heroic protagonist, but also with the brutal pirates, whose actions provide the entertaining matter of the romantic text.

As Emma Letley suggests, Stevenson's text overcomes the potential horrors of the story's multiple killings by drawing attention to itself as a generic exercise. At 'moments of great tension and terror […] the reader is taken away from the physical

details […] An in-built distance is thus present in the more terrifying episodes'. Such a strategy 'ensures that the sense of the story as boys' day-dream is maintained'.[208] It is true that Stevenson's tale necessarily shies away from the potentially visceral quality of the story's many violent scenes, enacting precisely the kind of 'simplification' that not only links the romance to a boys' day-dream, but is also key to the successful functioning of the romance narrative as escapism. I would argue, however, that the anxiety betrayed by the text about the falsifying nature of imaginative renderings of experience is not simply a desire to mediate potentially unpleasant experiences in order to make them suitable for young readers. It is also an attempt to dramatise the moment of reading in a manner that makes explicit the conscious divorcing of the visceral realities of such experiences from their literary representation – a separation that operates in that moment and makes its enjoyment possible.

v. Dick's Dilemma: Stevenson in *Young Folks*

Through such examples Stevenson's romances establish the dramatisation of the reading experience as a fundamental element of the genre. Pre-empting readerly experience of romantic incident, however, also involves a manipulation of the way in which the narrative content will be circulated and consumed. Stevenson is very much aware, for example, of the different audiences to be catered for in writing for periodical and volume publication. If the inclusion of a poem like 'To the Hesitating Purchaser' is, at the beginning of the book edition of *Treasure Island*, a necessary way of signalling the kind of reading experience the consumer can expect from the volume, such a preface would be absurd in a magazine story. As he wrote in the dedication to the volume publication of *The Black Arrow* in 1888, '[t]hose who read volumes and those

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[208] Emma Letley, 'Introduction' to Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, ed. Emma Letley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. vii-xxiii (p. xix).

who read story papers belong to different worlds.'[209] This is not a pronouncement of authorial snobbery, any more than is the similar acknowledgement in 'Popular Authors', written at around the same time. Rather, it is a recognition that the readers of *Young Folks* already expect a certain kind of tale, whose conventions were not set by the author, but were already in place for him to adopt or to reject at his peril. They did not need to be told what kind of story they could expect – the readers of the novel, however, had to be informed (or reminded) of the reading experience such a work might provide.

Stevenson recognised and admired the producers of penny serials for young readers' periodicals not least because of their ability to adopt so successfully the narrative and aesthetic conventions that readerly expectation dictated as the purview of their chosen publication. This much is evident from 'Popular Authors'. But his correspondence emphasises just how committed he was to upholding these conventions in writing for the young readers of a penny publication. In a letter to W.E. Henley in 1881, he enthuses about the tale on which he has recently begun work: '*The Sea Cook, or Treasure Island:* A Story for Boys'. This early reference to the story in Stevenson's correspondence, as well as the pseudonym under which the tale was offered (Captain George North) demonstrates that Stevenson saw himself as engaged in writing a certain kind of narrative, designed to live up to the expectations of a particular readership. From the outset, it is characterised as 'a Story for Boys' and the pseudonym implicitly constructs an author with an adventurous career of his own – 'Captain' implies a naval or army background, while 'North' conjures geographical bearings and, hence, exploration. Moreover, his initial summary of the tale makes it clear that he intends to honour the Stephens Hayward tradition of giving the reader exactly what they expect

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[209] Stevenson, *The Black Arrow*, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *Tusitala Edition*, vol. ix (London: William Heineman, 1923), p. ix. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

with as little attempt as possible to stray from the path of convention: 'Will you be surprised to learn that it is about Buccaneers, that it begins in the *Admiral Benbow* public house on [the] Devon Coast, that it's all about a map and a treasure and a mutiny and a derelict ship and a current and a fine old Squire Trelawney'.[210]

It is not difficult to infer from this letter that Stevenson intended the tale as a fulfilment of readerly desires which, he imagined, its material and paratextual apparatus would inescapably encourage – indeed, it is, significantly, the title *page* that the letter evokes, rather than simply the title.[211] At this stage the story was designed, not with serial publication, but with immediate volume publication in mind. Stevenson's reference to a publishing house with a particular reputation for this kind of text betrays a commitment to market conventions – 'would you be surprised to hear, in this connection, the name of *Routledge*?' The laws of the marketplace are allowed to govern the production of the text to such an extent that originality or 'surprise', is banished, in favour of a submission to narrative facts, universally acknowledged, which bind certain kinds of conventional content to the means by which that content reaches the reader in the form of a printed text. The story was, we learn, even 'tried out' on Stevenson's stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, to ensure the desired effect (*Letters*, *Volume Three*, 225).

So self-conscious was Stevenson's attitude to the conventions of the popular romance that his writings for *Young Folks* must be seen not simply as the production of tales for a popular publication, but as a performance of a particular kind of authorship –

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[210] *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson,* ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, *Volume Three: August 1879 – September 1882* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 224-25. Further references to Stevenson's letters are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.
[211] The information is laid out on three lines, in imitation of the typical spacing of details on the title-page of a published volume. Thus:

> The Sea Cook,
> or Treasure Island
> A Story for Boys

a deliberate adoption of a specific role. He even signs the letter, 'R.L.S. Author of Boys' Stories'. At the same time, however, the anxiety with which the text of *Treasure Island* treats the imaginative depiction of the island by its child protagonist demonstrates the aim of this performative approach – to dramatise not only the process of construction involved in the writing of romance, but also the troubling amorality of romantic texts which renders problematic anything other than a self-consciously performative attitude *toward* such material. In short, if the author is expected to perform, then the reader is also expected to adopt a specific kind of role.

If Stevenson's contributions to *Young Folks* can be seen as a performance of authorship, however, it was one which its intended audience did not look upon as a success. Despite the best efforts of James Henderson (*Young Folks*'s editor) to persuade his subscribers that Captain North's piratical tale was 'an admirable one' of which he 'cannot speak too highly',[212] Stevenson was forced to admit to Charles Baxter that 'the readers thereof spew me, as an author, out of their mouth' (*Letters*, *Volume Three*, 250). When Henderson asked him for another contribution, therefore, it is hardly surprising that Stevenson opted to produce a tale with an even greater dependence on formulaic devices, episodic set-pieces and exciting incident (over and above considerations of characterisation and plot development) in order more closely to emulate the kind of serial usually to be found in the magazine's pages. Having modelled *Treasure Island* on his own childhood reading of penny serials of the kind detailed in 'Popular Authors', Stevenson was now to hone this imitative process by bringing it to bear not simply on the kind of tale that might appear in children's periodicals more generally, but in *Young Folks* specifically.

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[212] *Young Folks*, Vol. XIX, no. 572, 19 Nov 1881, p. 179. The response is to a letter from one 'J.M.' of Westport. As is usual in children's periodicals of the period, the letter itself is not printed.

Dedicating the first volume edition to his wife, Stevenson notes that *The Black Arrow* was written not only 'for a particular audience', but also 'in rivalry with a particular author'. The author in question was Alfred R. Phillips. A habitual contributor to *Young Folks*, Phillips's serial, *Don Zalva the Brave; or the Fortune-Favoured Knight of Andalusia*, ran simultaneously with *Treasure Island*, beating Stevenson's tale to the coveted front-page position. The appearance of the first instalment of *The Black Arrow* in the magazine's Midsummer Double Issue of 1883 coincided with both the final chapter of Phillips's *Glaucus; or, The Fight for the Faith: A Romance of Ancient Rome* and the first chapter of his new serial, *Sevajee, The Mahratta Chief: An East Indian Romance*. But if Phillips retains pride of place during the appearance of *Treasure Island*, this is not the case during the serialisation of Stevenson's next tale. Booth and Mehew's claim that the 'success of *The Black Arrow* in *Young Folks* relegated Phillips's current serial, *Sevajee* […], to the back pages' is an exaggeration, but the way in which possession of the prominent front pages alternates, during its run, between Stevenson's tale and *Sevajee* is certainly evidence that *The Black Arrow* had proved a greater success than Stevenson's previous contribution (*Letters*, *Volume Three*, p. 189 n.). The signs of readerly appreciation that appeared regularly in the correspondence pages of the paper also indicate that, in his self-styled 'rivalry' with the more experienced Phillips, Stevenson certainly held his own in the game of writing a *Young Folks* serial.

That Stevenson was so consciously aware of the 'rivalry' between himself and another of the paper's prolific contributors indicates his increased commitment to ingratiate himself into the milieu of *Young Folks* writers. Indeed, there is little within the tale itself to indicate that Stevenson had singled Phillips out for specific imitation when composing *The Black Arrow*. In fact, the elements that bring *The Black Arrow* in

line with the more popular tales in *Young Folks* at around this time are elements that signal its imitation of the fiction included in the periodical more generally. Begging its readers to pay special attention to Stevenson's new serial, for instance, the editor assures his readers that this new story 'is rich in incident of an exciting character'.[213] This alone would have differentiated it from *Treasure Island*. Certainly, exciting (and improbable) set-pieces like Jim's single-handed recapture of the *Hispaniola*, his battle with Israel Hands, the episode of the besieged fort and the climactic treasure-hunt itself might lead one to argue that *Treasure Island* had been similarly enriched by thrilling incident. Yet, despite the picturesque presence of Billy Bones, whose fantastical stories in the first number hint at events to come, very little actually happens in *Treasure Island* until the pirate's death and the arrival of Blind Pew in the third instalment. The opening instalements focus upon Jim's yearning for adventure and incident, rather than on the incidents themselves.

Reading the text in volume form, it is difficult to conceive how uninspiring a beginning this must have been for readers who, from the first paragraph of the first instalment, expected a constant stream of episodes 'rich in incident of an exciting character'. In Walter Villiers's *Sir Claude the Conqueror: A Story of English Chivalry*, for example, which begins in the same issue as the first number of *Treasure Island*, no sooner are the heroic protagonist and his beloved introduced than the hero is plunged into a fight to the death between himself and no less than twelve 'villainous-looking desperadoes' – a break-neck pace that continues throughout the serial's run.[214] The first part of Oliver Optic's *Lyon Heart; or Adrift in the World: An Adventure Story*, which coincided with the beginning of *The Black Arrow*'s serialization, begins with the

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[213] 'Our Midsummer Chat', *Young Folks*, Vol. XXII, no. 656 (Midsummer Double Issue), p. 213.
[214] Walter Villiers, *Sir Claude the Conqueror: A Tale of English Chivalry*, *Young Folks*, Vol. XIX, no. 565, 1 Oct 1881, p. 106.

eponymous young protagonist in the act of attempting to rescue his parents during a dramatic shipwreck and ends with the boy being press-ganged onto a vessel bound for the African coast. From the very first line, the tale delivers the 'adventure' promised by the title, with the young protagonist immediately 'adrift' not just in the world, but in an exciting and action-packed version of it. To compare it with the opening of *Treasure Island* highlights the striking contrast between the two. Lyon Heart is first encountered already in the midst of the most exciting of sea-faring incidents. Jim Hawkins, on the other hand, spends a good deal of time dreaming and speculating about sea-faring adventure, but does not encounter anything resembling a physical challenge until the third instalment – and does not actually set foot on a schooner himself until the fourth number. As thrilling as the events of *Treasure Island* may have been, therefore, its serialized opening, with its vague hints of adventure to come, could not hope to match the sheer intensity of incident provided elsewhere in the paper and betrays its roots as a narrative initially conceived for immediate publication as a one-volume novel – the work of an author not of 'boys' stories' but of boys' *books*.

Another difference between 'George North's' piratical romance and the other serials on offer in the paper is the nature of *Treasure Island*'s main character. As Robert Kiely points out, Jim is given plenty of opportunities to prove his fitness for the leading part in a tale of adventure, as 'things keep happening to him which he cannot foresee or prevent'.[215] Yet, while Jim faces these unforeseen challenges in a manner that demonstrates his ability to cope with the most daunting obstacles, thus demonstrating his fitness for purpose in the role of romantic protagonist, he begins from the position of a normal, unexceptional young man. He resembles Walter Scott's heroes of the early part of the century – passive figures who are drawn into circumstances rather than

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[215] Robert Kiely, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 26.

shaping their own destinies. His heroic qualities are not intrinsic or innate features of his being, but are proved through the heroic deeds he finds himself able to enact under pressure as the need arises.

This lack of an innate easily-detectable heroism differentiates him from the majority of the protagonists in *Young Folks*' adventure serials. Characteristically, these are presented from the outset as models of virtue whose more than usually high degree of mental and physical ability single them out from the villains whom they encounter, marking them as an ideal or heroic type from the outset. Sir Claude, for instance, despite his youth, is already a formidable adventurer when we first meet him. Not only is he a 'truly noble and gallant-looking youth', but he is also experienced in the ways of combat and the life of militaristic action: 'Has not my courage been tried? Has not my proficiency in arms been proven? Am I not attached to the person of Edward the Black Prince?' Despite his vow to his beloved Alicia that he is 'determined to win my spurs and climb to fame', [216] he is already well on the way to achieving his goal. A similar situation exists with Lyon Heart, who is designated from the outset as a natural adventurer – not least by dint of his improbable nomenclature. He has 'a powerful frame for a boy of his years, and he had the heart of a lion in his breast'; he is 'stout and hearty', the result of four years' work on a farm. He is 'a great reader' – but he is also 'a bold, brave boy'.[217] In these instances, the protagonist's encounter with the physical challenges of the romantic narrative is not a development, but a confirmation of an already intrinsic facet of his personality.

These differences point towards an important fact that must be borne in mind when examining the texts of *Treasure Island* and *The Black Arrow* – that *Treasure*

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[216] Villiers, *Young Folks*, Vol. XIX, no. 565, 1 Oct 1881, p. 105.
[217] Oliver Optic, *Lyon Heart; or Adrift in the World: An Adventure Story*, *Young Folks*, Vol. XXII, no. 656 (Midsummer Double Issue), p. 213.

Island was written, initially, for volume publication, while *The Black Arrow* was, as Stevenson himself notes, written with the 'particular audience' of *Young Folks* in mind. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that *The Black Arrow* has less in common with Stevenson's earlier serial than it does with the much more conventional story of *Sir Claude*, which debuted at the same time. Like Sir Claude, Richard 'Dick' Shelton, has already experienced at first hand the tumultuous tribulations of the Wars of the Roses – his father has been murdered in the course of the conflict and he is the ward of Sir Daniel, a prominent knight of the Lancastrian party. Much of the story, as with the tale of Sir Claude, has to do with the adventures that befall Dick in his quest to rescue his beloved (Dick's Joanna, like Claude's Alicia, is kidnapped by the villains of the piece mid-way through the action) and win his spurs. Yet, like Sir Claude, he is already well placed to fulfil this ambition. Confronted, on the serial's first page, with the ringing of the bell of Tunstall Hamlet's Moat House at 'an unaccustomed hour' (*The Black Arrow*, 3), everyone in the village, including Sir Daniel's messenger, is ignorant 'of what was forward'. Dick Shelton, however, is at no such disadvantage:

> He, at the least, would know, and they hailed him and begged him to explain.
> He drew bridle willingly enough – a young fellow not yet eighteen, sun-
> browned and grey-eyed, in a jacket of deer's leather, with a black velvet collar,
> a green hood upon his head, and a steel crossbow on his back. (*The Black
> Arrow*, 4)

The peasants' expectations and Dick's appearance, suggest a youth who is beyond the ordinary run of young men. Similarly, his 'sun-browned' appearance and his bearing

(on horseback carrying a crossbow) signal his readiness for battle.[218] In answer to the peasants' enquiry, Dick offers the thrilling information that 'a battle is impending' (*The Black Arrow*, 4). Like Lyon Hart and Sir Claude (but unlike Jim Hawkins) Dick is a young man whose fitness for adventure is not in question. *Treasure Island* begins with a narrator who looks back in safety at events that have already happened and spends several numbers merely foreshadowing these events. The narrator of *The Black Arrow*, on the other hand, takes the reader straight to the point where the adventure can begin, commencing, quite literally, with a call to arms. Even if direct physical conflict does not occur until the next number, making this opening somewhat tamer than *Sir Claude*'s, there is at least the picturesque prospect of knights on horseback and unlike *Treasure Island*, the young hero is of their number, rather than a mere dreamer or on-looker.

If *The Black Arrow* disguises itself as a typical *Young Folks* serial, however, then it does so in order to infiltrate the generic realm in which it places itself, eventually subverting the very assumptions it apparently adopts. At every point, the serial overturns the uncomplicated dependence of these tales on the protagonist's (and the readers') engagement with 'incident of an exciting character'. With its endless sequences of thrilling captures and resourceful escapes and its author's apparent willingness to dispense with the inconvenience of a plot to link the various set-pieces together, the tale apparently fulfils to the utmost Stevenson's ideal of romance as a genre dependent upon the details of individual incidents over and above such realist trappings as complex psychological motivation or a focus upon the emotional consequence of the incidents in question. Yet, in so totally fulfilling that aim, the text is

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[218] This also constitutes a visual difference between Stevenson's serials: the illustration for *Treasure Island* is of the pirates (the only one that accompanied the serial throughout its run), while the one for *The Black Arrow* is of Dick, on horseback, poised for action.

also at pains to point to the danger of the moral bankruptcy involved in constructing such a tale. Ultimately, the serial uses the trappings of the adventure serial not only to provide the requisite escape into 'a-moral', incident-laden romance, but also to interrogate the legitimacy of those incidents and of the escape they offer. At first such an interrogation is subtle, but as the serial progresses the undermining of the romance's dependence upon action for its own sake is so overt as to constitute an implicit commentary on the tales that surround it.

Dick's active role in events enables readers imaginatively to participate in historical narrative by engaging with the protagonist's embroilment in war as romantic action. Such a move complicates the romance's ability to focus on the violent fact of combat for its own sake, by emphasising the arbitrariness of Dick's allegiances – of the cause in whose name such acts are committed. In so doing, the tale demonstrates the way in which action passively observed differs from action physically undertaken. Early in the narrative, for example, Dick is asked to declare to which house his master is affiliated, but is unable to do so, 'for his guardian had changed sides continually in the troubles of that period, and every change had brought him some increase of fortune'. Dick, 'colouring a little', is clearly embarrassed by the moral dubiousness of his guardian's position and, by extension, his own (*The Black Arrow*, 5).

His embarrassment is well founded – as a protagonist of an adventure serial he is a good deal less certain of his allegiances than that other *Young Folks* knight, Sir Claude. In Villiers's tale, the very fact of allegiance to the crown legitimates the young knight's engagement in conflict. For example, John Chandos, the young man whom Sir Claude rescues in the first number, is squire to one Sir Walter Manny. The fact that 'Sir Walter Manny and the Black Prince are the closest of friends' makes things very simple for Sir Claude: 'let my friends be your friends – your friends my friends: your foes my

foes – my foes your foes.' This is important, because the right allegiance legitimises much that would otherwise be beyond the moral pale. Thus, spying on those responsible for the attack on Chandos in order to prove their suspicions regarding the villains' treacherous involvement with a French plot, the two are able to justify their actions by allusion to the present circumstances:

> 'I neither like spying through keyholes or playing eavesdropper,' said Chandos, in a whisper, 'but under the circumstances, I deem myself justified in doing both.'
>
> 'Fully so,' asserted Claude.

In the world of *Sir Claude*, an innate moral virtue ensures that the ends justify the means. It is fortunate then, that The Black Prince is a 'gentler prince, a more accomplished gentlemen, or more valiant warrior' than any other, who is sure to 'cover himself with glory when England's banner is waving over the fields of France' – determining one's allegiance couldn't be easier. Moreover, the Prince's followers are similarly blessed with a worthiness that is not just innate, but visually detectable. Chandos, for example, is immediately recognisable as the servant of the prince, possessing a 'decidedly handsome' and 'frank, open countenance, in which could be read at a glance, "Truth, honesty, and valour"'. His attackers, on the other hand, are not only palpably dishonourable ('"Dastards!" he thundered. "What foul play is this? Twelve to one! Out on you all for very shame!"'), but have the misfortune to be born with a countenance on which their negative qualities are writ large:

> [One of the villains] was a harsh-visaged man, whose every lineament bore the unmistakable career of dissipation and vice […] [His] *vis-à-vis* was an individual of a different stamp altogether, being a huge, course, bloated, red-faced man, in half-armour, whose character could be read at a single glance.
>
> Blusterer, bully, poltroon![219]

Truth, honour, valour, as well as allegiance to these virtues, are highly praised qualities in *Young Folks*. The issue containing the first part of *Treasure Island* and *Sir Claude*, for example, contains a poem by 'E.E.B.', entitled 'The Boys We Need', whose final stanza bestows 'honour' upon the boy 'Whose legend on his shield is this: / "Right always wins the day."'[220] The issue for the week ending 19 Nov 1881 contains another poem ('Brave and True' by G.B. Griffith), which insists that 'Boys love their truth and follow it'.[221] The same issue ends with a short motto: 'The discovery of what is true and the practice of what is good are the most important objects in life.' This is an admirable enough ideology when, as in *Sir Claude*, allegiance to these virtues is rendered unproblematic by being easily legible in the personages of 'good' leaders. In *The Black Arrow*, however, civil war renders the location of virtue at best problematic and at worst impossible in the face of necessary and inevitable pragmatism. Decisions cannot be merely deferred to allegiance to a particular cause or party, nor is the intrinsic virtue of such allegiance allowed to go unquestioned. In negotiating the protagonist's loyalties, the text subverts the easy recourse to self-righteousness so readily exploited to legitimate the game of battle in a text like *Sir Claude* and, in so doing, reveals the

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[219] Villiers, *Young Folks*, Vol. XIX, no. 565, 1 Oct 1881, p. 106.
[220] E.E.B., 'The Boys We Need', *Young Folks*, Vol. XIX, no. 565, 1 Oct 1881, p. 112.
[221] G.B. Griffith, 'Brave and True', *Young Folks*, Vol. XIX, no. 572, 19 Nov 1881, p. 180.

underlying amorality of the violent action that plays so fundamental a part in a successful romance.

Observing a Yorkist victory in the woods near Sir Daniel's stronghold, for example, Dick reflects on the 'ugly choice' facing his guardian: 'Had Sir Daniel joined and was he now a fugitive and ruined? Or had he deserted to the side of York, and was he forfeit to honour?' (*The Black Arrow*, 63). Because of his allegiance, however, the 'ugly choice' is also necessarily Dick's own: 'by the issue of some hours of battle, at which many of them had not been present, they had all become punishable traitors to the State, outside the buckler of the law' (*The Black Arrow*, 80). As the realisation dawns upon Dick that his guardian and his friend, the priest Sir Oliver, were among those responsible for the murder of his father, the dilemma is given a personal inflection: 'was Dick, also, to turn upon the man who had nourished and taught him, who had severely punished, indeed, but yet unwearyingly protected his youth? The necessity, if it should prove to be one, was cruel' (*The Black Arrow*, 84-85). Dick confides in his guardian, who offers him a choice: 'fight […] for the man that fed and fought for your infancy; or else—the door standeth open, the woods are full of mine enemies—go' (*The Black Arrow*, 90). Dick's reluctance to choose the former option leads Sir Daniel to comment: 'y'are a fair-day friend, it seemeth, and now seek to clear yourself of your allegiance […] Gratitude and faith are words, Dick Shelton […] but I look to deeds' (*The Black Arrow*, 88).

While the exciting prospect of exile to 'woods […] full of mine enemies' hints at the text's uninhibited unfolding of further romantic incidents, the passage also undercuts the appeal of such incidents by establishing the villain of the text as one who looks to deeds in a vacuum with no consideration of their moral consequence or worth. The villain of *The Black Arrow* is revealed, therefore, to be one whose status as a

blackguard derives not from any villainy intrinsic in his actions, but from a conscious desire to view 'deeds' in a certain way. In fact, he is uncomfortably comparable to Stevenson's ideal 'purchaser' – one who recognises that 'there is a vast deal in life and letters both which is not immoral, but simply a-moral' and that narratives (be they fictional or historical) often turn, pragmatically, 'not upon what a man shall choose to do, but on how he manages to do it; not on the passionate slips and hesitations of conscience, but on the problems of the body and of the practical intelligence' (*Memories and Portraits*, 174-75). Readers who judged tales according to their ability to provide 'incident of an exciting character', face, here, an ethical challenge – that of being identified with the villain of the tale. By forcing Dick to enter a world in which the interest turns not only on what he does but also on *how* and *why* he chooses to do it, the narrative demonstrates the impossibility of the romantic ideal by reintroducing an element of moral culpability into a narrative world whose function depends on the amorality of its plots. Ultimately, therefore, *The Black Arrow* is no more nor less than a fully-fledged sabotage operation – its target the adventure genre itself.

Immediately following Dick's escape from Sir Daniel, for instance, the young protagonist and his gang of outcasts steal a vessel belonging to one Captain Arblaster, with the aim of rescuing Joanna. The episode gives rise to scenes of low comedy in a tavern as Arblaster and his mate are plied with drink, culminating in scenes of mayhem on the beach as Dick's party are ambushed. Yet, the text returns to this earlier episode later on when, having escaped once more from Sir Daniel's clutches, Dick unexpectedly finds himself confronted by the vengeful Captain. Thus cornered, Dick finds that he is 'not merely helpless, but, as his conscience loudly told him when it was too late, actually guilty – actually the bankrupt debtor of the man whose ship he had stolen and lost' (*The Black Arrow*, 202). Dick faces not only a reversal of fortune here,

but also a reversal in his role as romance protagonist – from noble adventurer to thief and villain. The point is hammered home by a third appearance of Arblaster, who confronts Dick with the consequences of his earlier actions. Having fallen into the company of Richard Crookback, who is now about to slay the unfortunate Captain, Dick sees an opportunity to right the wrong that he has done Arblaster and begs the future Richard III to set the unfortunate seaman free. To Dick's dismay, Arblaster is less than grateful and, finding his mercy spurned, Dick is forced to watch, 'through tears, the poor old man, bemused with liquor and sorrow, go shambling away […] and for the first time began to understand the desperate game that we play in life; and how a thing once done is not to be changed or remedied, by any penitence' (*The Black Arrow*, 236).

Similarly subversive is the way in which Dick's exuberance at winning his spurs is soon superseded by a meditation on the horrors of war which, we are reminded, involves not only adventure, chivalry and romance, but also 'the blows of the sledge–hammer on some barricaded door, and now the miserable shrieks of women':

> Dick's heart had just been awakened. He had just seen the cruel consequences of his own behaviour; and the thought of the sum of misery that was now acting in the whole of Shoreby filled him with despair. (*The Black Arrow*, 237)

Dick's heart may have 'just been awakened', but so is the reader's. Not only does the scene emphasise the amorality of romantic action – it also, by dint of its appearance in a *Young Folks* serial, undermines the whole escapist project of such fiction. Having rejected Sir Daniel's morally bankrupt idea of action as the only fixed point in an inherently mutable world, Dick attempts to maintain an alternative position, seeking to

lend a moral dimension to his active participation in events – a position in which the action of his adventure plot can be translated into a series of morally commendable deeds in opposition to the morally dubious deeds of his guardian. Gradually, however, this position is revealed as untenable – especially in a state of civil war. In the end, Dick's only choice is to abandon the wars completely and we eventually leave him, reunited with Johanna, content 'to find the sounds [of battle] still drawing farther and farther away' (*The Black Arrow*, 253). *The Black Arrow*'s conclusion fundamentally contradicts the 'Gossip on Romance' insofar as it undermines its promise to provide amoral action. Instead, action that appears amoral is eventually revealed as anything but. Readers are not allowed to become 'submerged' by the tale 'as by a billow' and are forced to 'argue', if not with the author, then with the other stories in the periodical.

Like *Treasure Island* before it, *The Black Arrow* enacts a commentary on the genre within which it is situated. Yet, in being so closely related to the conventions of the other stories in *Young Folks*, its ethical subversion of romance emphasises the link between the performance of genre and the performative role of writing for a particular audience: the collusion of genre with the material conditions of production and reception. Both serials subvert the romance genre, but *The Black Arrow* takes particular care to disguise itself as a *Young Folks* serial. Initially begun as a novel, *Treasure Island* addresses itself to readers of romantic fiction in volume form, and fails to attune itself to the specific conventions of *Young Folks*. In volume form, its prefatory poem reminds the 'hesitating purchaser' what they are to expect. Yet it is a series of novels that the poem offers as an intertext. Within the pages of *Young Folks*, such a preface would have been rendered unnecessary by the presence of an already-determined readership, which knew precisely the kinds of tale they might be expected to find therein.

The Black Arrow, however, critiques not only the romance genre, but also the kind of romance that predominated specifically in *Young Folks*. On the one hand, it addresses the issue of adherence to convention as the legitimator of action in life, which Stevenson had criticised in his ethical essays, by demonstrating that ideological allegiances were often more complex than available models (real or fictional) could account for. On the other hand, it maintains the insistent division between life and art insisted upon in Stevenson's literary criticism, emphasising the fact that the exhilarating appeal of romantic incidents could only function as long as their barbarous nature was presented in an aesthetically appealing way – as long as their 'amorality' is maintained. The conventional romantic situation of virtue versus its easily-discernible opposite – the schematic that makes the action of *Sir Claude* possible – is exposed in *The Black Arrow* as deeply simplistic: 'if that a poor gentleman fight not upon the one side, perforce he must fight upon the other. He may not stand alone; 'tis not in nature'. Challenged, at the end, by Joanna's maid Alicia, Dick is forced to reject this simple ethical schematic: 'Ye that fight but for a hazard, what are ye but a butcher? War is but noble by the cause, and y' have disgraced it' (*The Black Arrow*, 243).

In *The Black Arrow*, therefore, a subversive interrogation of the romance genre is intertwined with a metafictional emphasis upon the romance as physical commodity. 'To a Hesitating Purchaser' is designed precisely to draw attention to *Treasure Island* as a book among other books (those of Kingston, Cooper and Ballantyne). In enumerating the stock features of *Treasure Island* in conjunction with these older books and the comparative pleasures they offer, it turns away from the subject matter of the story to construct an image of the potential buyer reading that story. Stevenson's defence of reading as an escape becomes more than just an expression of a personal preference, and his romances more than simply an attempt to provide the potential

purchasers of his novels with an experience that he himself found pleasurable. Instead, they are fulfilments of his literary theory, designed manifestly to represent a change from 'the atmosphere and tenor' of the reader's life; to enact a game that 'so chimes with his fancy that he can join in it with all his heart'; to provide a tale which he 'loves to recall' and dwell upon 'with entire delight' (*Memories and Portraits*, 187). Yet they also reveal themselves at every turn to be exactly what they really are – delightful constructions that only exist as printed words in the hands of the reader, ready to stand or fall by their capacity to delight. In both cases, Stevenson was able to offer his readers the pleasurable reading experience they desired in a manner that exposed the terms and conditions upon which that pleasure rested – an enjoyment of action for its own sake, which remained viable only as long as it was temporary.

In writing *Treasure Island* and *The Black Arrow*, Stevenson came to realise that the success of his particular generic project – to provide readers with the perfect literary bolt-hole from the complexities of lived experience, whilst neutralising the deception inherent in simplifying that experience – depended upon the text's final appearance as a physical commodity able to attract those readers who would recognise the genre in which he was working and respond accordingly. Not fully resembling a *Young Folks* serial, *Treasure Island* risked confusing readers whose expectations it failed to meet. 'To the Hesitating Purchaser' thus becomes a necessary means of signalling the terms and conditions of a reading experience that the volume offers as a commodity, yet critiques as text. In *The Black Arrow*, the existence of the story paper itself becomes a kind of material preface for readers, similarly signalling the generic context in which the tale is to be read and thus empowering its subversive project. The circumstances of these two novels' production were governed by Stevenson's realisation that the novelist

is always the author of material, as well as of textual commodities – and that these were not always presented, physically, as books.

In a marketplace characterised by an increasing proliferation of fictional forms and genres, late-nineteenth-century readers were increasingly in need of extra-textual information to alert them to the kind of texts whose rules their reading would need to abide by. In such a context, Stevenson vigorously affirmed the need, not only to give his readers the fictional forms they most desired, but also to ensure that customers would recognise what they were being offered. Aesthetically, the customer's search for textual gratification was, for Stevenson, always right. Ethically, however, his intense awareness of the difference between fiction and reality led him to permeate his work with metafictional reminders that terms and (material) conditions would always apply.

Chapter 3

**'A Momentary Contact With Reality': Reading and Otherness in E.M. Forster
and M.R. James**

i. The trouble with Leonard

In the wake of the 1870 Education Act, debates about reading – and particularly the
reading of fiction – took a new turn. Wilde's defence, in his Preface to *Dorian Gray*, of
what he saw as the fundamental amorality of books, demonstrates that concerns
regarding the effect of books upon the morality of readers were ongoing. Implicit in
such debates was an underlying acceptance that reading had a formative effect upon the
reader's character and that the choice of literature was thus a matter of extreme
moment. As well as echoing the concerns of evangelical Christianity, with its insistence
on a personal reading of the Bible to bring one closer to God, the formative effect of
literature was an idea that also permeated the spirit underlying the production of
imperial romances, which Stevenson examined in his self-reflexive approach to that
genre. In romance, the idea took on the political dimension of 'forming' future subjects
and rulers of an imperial nation. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the
advent of university degrees in English Literature and the passing of the Education Acts
had brought about a situation in which an increasingly democratised print culture was
debated in terms that foregrounded reading (even fiction reading) as an educational
activity, both within the framework of a formal degree or school curriculum and as a
means of auto-didactic self-improvement through the cultivation of a refined and
beneficial literary taste.[222]

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[222] Walter Allen provides an effective account of how reactions to the Education Act of 1870 helped to
intensify debate about the novel as an art-form versus the novel as a mere diversion – debates which the
romance/realism question, considered in the previous chapter, exemplify. For Allen, the question of how
far the Act actually made a difference to literacy figures and to the reading of the newly-educated classes

Some participants in these debates worked to defend fiction from accusations of frivolity, arguing that that even fictional works allowed the reader access to a store of knowledge about life. Such defences were predicated upon an ideal reader who wished to be educated as well as entertained. In 1914, for example, H.G. Wells sought to reject 'the theory that the novel is wholly and solely a means of relaxation'.[223] He objects to 'the Weary Giant theory', which hypothesises 'a man, burthened, toiling, worn' after the exhausting daily activities that 'constitute the substance of a prosperous man's life' (Wells, *Englishman*, 148-49). Such a theory delineates the activity of novel reading, to its ultimate detriment, as one that is always undertaken during this 'little precious interval of leisure':

> He wants to forget the troubling realities of life. He wants to be taken out of himself, to be cheered, consoled, amused – above all, amused. He doesn't want ideas, he doesn't want facts; above all, he doesn't want – *Problems*. (Wells, *Englishman*, 149; Wells's emphasis)

This conception of the fiction-reader, Wells argues, dominated the mid-Victorian period but, by 1914, both 'fiction and criticism […] are in revolt against that tired giant, the

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is less important than the defensiveness with which writers now portrayed themselves as writing either for a 'quarter-educated' mass or a more sophisticated audience whose desires extended beyond a wish merely to be entertained (Walter Allen, *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* [1954] [London: Penguin, 1991], p. 260). Kelly J. Mays reiterates the point in her introduction to the publishing context of the novel in the period: 'the perceived increase in the size of the reading public was seen to entail an increase in diversity that rendered it impossible any longer to envision that public either as a culturally homogeneous group or as one that shared the same background and values as those seeking to reach it through the written word' (Kelly J. Mays, 'The Publishing World' in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing [Oxford: Blackwell, 2005], pp. 11-30 [Blackwell Reference Online, http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405132916_chunk_g97814051329163, accessed: 4th May 2012]). In consequence, the idea of what the novel should offer readers – what values it should enshrine for the newly-literate masses – came to be seen as an issue of the utmost importance.
[223] H.G. Wells, *An Englishman Looks at the World: Being a Series of Unrestrained Remarks Upon Contemporary Matters* (London: Cassell, 1914), p. 148. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

prosperous Englishman' and Wells places himself at the vanguard of a faction attempting to reclaim the activity of novel reading as a more serious pursuit (Wells, *Englishman*, 149). For Wells, the problem is that writers feel a need to serve implied readers who desire fiction that divert them from the complexity of human experience. By striving to meet this desire, argues Wells, authors succeed only in creating in reality the implied audience they have imagined while writing. As a result, they both manufacture and sustain a demand for literature devoid of anything 'significant and real', which they then, paradoxically, feel compelled to serve. The solution, he suggests, is that readers be 'trained' to accept the kind of literature they require, rather than the literature that habit has led them to desire: 'So far from the weary reader being a decently tired giant, we realise that he is only an […] undertrained giant, and we are […] resolved to exercise his higher ganglia in every possible way' (Wells, *Englishman*, 150).

As John Batchelor has pointed out, Wells's notion that mid-Victorian commentators viewed the novel as merely a means of relaxation is 'manifestly wrong': 'it was clearly recognised from the 1840s onwards that the novel was a vehicle of moral judgement and social education'.[224] As such, Wells cannot claim as his own the idea that the novel is an 'important and necessary' moral force in civilization.[225] Batchelor is also right to point out that Wells's diatribe against the 'Weary Giant' merely obscures what is the main focus of the essay – an attack on those who exercised 'fierce pedantries' regarding the novel's 'general form', foremost among whom was Henry James, with whom Wells was embroiled in a heated literary dispute (Wells, *Englishman*, 150).

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[224] John Batchelor, *H.G. Wells* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), p. 115; indeed, evangelicals like Macaulay had recognised the didactic power of fiction as early as 1810.
[225] Ibid.

The essay's concerns about the detrimental relegation of literature to the realm of leisurely pursuits is a reminder, however, of the way in which such anxieties were debated in the early years of the twentieth century. Frank Swinnerton explicitly references Wells's 'Weary Giant' theory in his dismissal of Stevenson's romances. These are 'strong enough in invention to delight that typical person called by Mr. H.G. Wells the "weary giant," engrossing reading to the accompaniment of cigars and whisky-and-soda, but not, in the way of art, quite what we require from works of creative imagination'.[226] Of course, to criticise Stevenson in this way is to ignore that author's own view of mass entertainment and high art as not incompatible. For Stevenson, the former was merely a different edition of the latter, with its own disciplines and its own standards of literary value and aesthetic success. In dismissing Stevenson's works as 'not, in the way of art, quite what we require from works of creative imagination', Swinnerton fails to realise that his own conception of what can and should be considered 'art' might be very different from Stevenson's, whose work is constructed according to alternative (rather than innately inadequate) aesthetic standards. Even so, Swinnerton's easy dismissal of the notion that literature was at its most valuable when it was most 'engrossing' provides an idea of what, in the years following Stevenson's death, constituted that which critics 'require[d] from works of creative imagination' – something which could educate the masses about lived experience, rather than facilitating an engrossing escape from it.[227]

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[226] Frank Swinnerton, *R.L. Stevenson: A Critical Study* (London: Martin Secker, 1914), p. 125.

[227] Both Wells's essay and Swinnerton's book also reflect the political context of the Education Acts. Linda K. Hughes points out that the act, which was expected greatly to increase the country's literacy rates, arose as a necessary concomitant to the Second Reform Bill (1867). This bill 'effectively doubled the number of voters in England' and Forster's Act facilitated the education of 'the masses for democratic responsibility as informed citizens' (Linda K. Hughes, '1870' in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker [Oxford: Blackwell, 1999], pp. 35-50 [Blackwell Reference Online, http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9780631218760_chunk_g97806312187603, accessed: 4th May 2012])**.** Although writing over forty years after the passage of Forster's Act, Wells

Swinnerton's remarks nevertheless only cohere partially with Wells's argument. If Wells's essay can be read as an implicit condemnation of certain kinds of literary texts on the basis of the assumptions according to which they have been written, then it also betrays a certain attitude towards the *reading* of texts more generally. What Wells attacks is the idea that novels should ever be conceived as 'wholly and solely' suitable for relaxation – not that they should never be designed for such an end. In fact, Wells's essay exemplifies a growing belief not only in reading as a programmatic method of acquiring and cultivating literary taste, but also in the inherent value of literary taste as part of a liberal education – not only for the educated elite, but also for the newly-literate masses. In this sense, the essay articulates a familiar concern in the period, already discussed in my introductory chapter, about the uses to which board school pupils would put their newly-acquired literacy. In rejecting the idea of fiction reading as a mere leisure activity, the essay tacitly suggests the opposite – that English fiction is eminently suitable for programmatic study, so long as the reader can be trained to read the right kinds of text in the right ways.

E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) exemplifies and parodies Wells's ideal reader in the person of the clerk Leonard Bast. Leonard, by means of diligently perusing the canon of English literature, hopes to expand his cultural boundaries. A 'weary giant', his leisure time is spent in diligent, avocational study of English literary classics, not to mention a similarly attentive perambulation of London's concert halls and galleries. His aim is self-improvement – to discover something within 'culture' that

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reflects a late-nineteenth-century critical tradition (of which George Moore, Thomas Hardy, Edmund Gosse and Henry James were a part) that advocated the modern novel's role as 'a widely-heard participator in the great […] controversies of the day' (Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel*, 10). Yet these aesthetic arguments about literature's capacity to act as a forum for debate are inseparable from the new constitutional state of affairs – the simultaneous increase in the voting and the reading population – that frames it. It is surely no coincidence that debates about whether novels should train readers to engage with contemporary 'problems' arose at a time when a section of the electorate who, in the eyes of many commentators, were perceived as new to reading, also received a political stake in discussions of socio-political issues for the first time.

might provide the key to raising him above his own lowly social situation. His description of the 'voice' that speaks to him from the pages of Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) illustrates the terms on which this auto-didactic quest is undertaken:

> Leonard listened to it with reverence. He felt that he was being done good to, and that if he kept on with Ruskin, and the Queen's Hall Concerts, and some pictures by Watts, he would one day push his head out of the grey waters and see the universe. He believed in sudden conversion […] he hoped to come to Culture suddenly, much as the Revivalist hopes to come to Jesus.[228]

Leonard's determination to achieve a holistic understanding of 'culture' by pursuing an improving programme of cultural *consumption* aligns him with Wells's ideal figure of the self-trained auto-didactic reader. Yet, as the passage complains, equipping oneself with the right books does not lead, automatically, to a more informed reading. Leonard's books remain objects which he gazes upon, even underlines, but never actually reads. Instead, he 'listens' to the text passively and 'with reverence'. He appears to view the text as one whose meaning is firmly in place for him to uncover, much as Ruskin himself describes in *Sesame and Lilies* when he compares the reader of great books to an Australian miner in search of precious metal. Passive observance of already-designated masterpieces is, for Leonard, the means by which 'culture' – the indefinable something that will enable one to push one's head 'out of the grey waters and see the universe' – will be conveyed to the reader in the same way that a bottle disgorges a reviving tonic. What is criticised in this passage is precisely Wells's idea of culture as a list of prescribed masterworks. The passage contains a debilitating paradox

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[228] E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 62. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

that signals the project's inevitable failure; tellingly, it does not reveal exactly *how* culture might allow Leonard to 'push his head out of the grey'. His faith in cultural consumption as a means of effecting his escape from lower middle-class mundanity is blind – it is never obvious what that escape entails, nor how cultural consumption and social improvement are linked as cause and effect.

The problem is Leonard's implicit 'othering' of the culture he hopes paradoxically to appropriate and which, for him, books represent. The programmatic approach to the kinds of works that Wells and Swinnerton 'require' to be read lead to precisely the engrossing escape from lived experience towards which, they insist, real literary 'art' should never strive and the absence of which Swinnerton denounces in Stevenson. Indeed, culture becomes aligned, for Leonard, with romance: his is 'a gray life, and to brighten it he had ruled off a few corners for Romance'. Seeing the leisured, educated Schlegel sisters as 'denizens of Romance', he treasures their acquaintance whilst simultaneously working to 'keep [them] to the corner he had assigned them, pictures that must not walk out of their frames' (*Howards End*, 129). Margaret Schlegel's calling card comes to symbolise, for him, 'the life of culture'. His insertion of the card into the volume of Ruskin literalises the taxonomic operation that, for him, constitutes cultural consumption. Not only Ruskin's text, but also the actual physical volume, into which this symbol of 'the life of culture' is placed, becomes a repository for Leonard's reification of this 'life of culture' as already inimical to his own existence. As a gesture, it figures culture as something that, for Leonard, exists in terms of what it obviously isn't, whilst never bringing him any closer to discovering what it actually is. Culture, for Leonard, is thus always already separate from the quotidian: 'He did not want Romance to collide with the Porphyrion [the insurance company for whom he works], still less with Jacky [his working-class wife]' (*Howards End*, 130). In

making culture an escape from the drabness of the quotidian 'daily grey', therefore, Leonard in fact forecloses his own hypothetical escape route by classifying it as *already* inimical to the experiences he sees as open to him.

Leonard reflects a difficulty identified by Chris Baldick in the arguments of well-meaning nineteenth-century educationalists like Matthew Arnold and H.G. Robinson. These championed the teaching of English literature to working men, as a substitute for the Greek and Latin classics, on the basis that they might 'promote sympathy and fellow feeling among all classes'.[229] Arnold and Robinson believed in circumventing the charge of mere indoctrination by foregrounding 'English Literature' (the subject) as 'the fostering of a more or less independent process of reflection by the learner, rather than the passive swallowing of dogma'.[230] Yet, the way in which the 'sympathy' and 'fellow feeling' were located in a 'culture' that texts already enshrined in advance – and which the 'trained' reader could recover through a 'correct' reading – was in itself dangerously close to indoctrination. By highlighting the working-class reader's *a priori* alienation from the realm of sweetness and light, this humanistic approach actually 'forces an awareness of class inferiority upon its unrefined readers' by construing them as already less sophisticated than 'the intellectual leaders of the race'. As Baldick notes, 'Robinson's serene region of truth […] places itself "above the smoke and stir, the din and turmoil of man's lower life of care and business and debate" […] [by means of] a particular form of cultural intimidation'.[231]

Wells's friend and fellow-author Arnold Bennett provides an alternative idea of reading as a means of education. His *Literary Taste: How to Form It* (1909) is, in one sense, a manual for constructing an affordable library of improving books. Yet, where

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[229] H.G. Robinson, *How To Teach English Literature* (1880), quoted in Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 62.
[230] Baldick, p. 65.
[231] Ibid. p. 67.

Wells regards the educative 'value' of reading as the discovery of something that
resides eternally within certain texts to be 'discovered' by the trained reader in one
revelatory hermeneutic gesture, Bennett denounces such an idea as, for the educator,
potentially counterproductive. Taking Shakespeare as an example, he claims that the
dramatist 'is "taught" in schools […] in a determined effort to make every boy in the
land a lifelong enemy of Shakespeare'.[232] To 'teach' Shakespeare as an established
classic of English Literature automatically separates reading for pleasure and reading
for study, with the result that the reading of canonical literature is transformed into a
teleological labour – the search for the thing beyond oneself:

> [T]he classics do not afford you a pleasure commensurate with their renown.
> You peruse them with a sense of duty, a sense of doing the right thing, a sense
> of 'improving yourself,' rather than with a sense of gladness. You do not smack
> your lips; you say: 'That is good for me.' (Bennett, 11)

For Bennett, the problem lies in viewing culture as something that is already there to be
attained – an attractive prize already possessed by a privileged few. 'Literary taste,' he
argues, certainly 'serves […] as a certificate of correct culture', but it is also valuable as
'a […] charming distraction […] a private pastime' (Bennett, 2). While Bennett
concedes the existence of taste *as* a badge conferring distinction, therefore, he also
insists on its equal function as a means of relaxation. He rejects emphatically the idea
that taste is something to be learned in a programme of utilitarian 'betterment', saying
disdainfully of those who propagate such a notion, '[t]here are certain things a man

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[232] Arnold Bennett, *Literary Taste: How to Form It* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), p. 10.
Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

ought to know, or to know about, and literature is one of them: such is their idea'
(Bennett, 1).

Bennett insists upon the detrimental effects of presenting taste as the ability to detect, through a programmatic study of particular texts, exactly what one has been told to find. He also sets up, as the natural contrast, an implication that literary taste is as much about what the attentive reader brings to the text as it is about the detection of some special element already latent within it – and that literature, in a circular process, teaches readers to recognise their own experiences. Presenting an imaginative definition of what literature is, he says (addressing an implied heterosexual male reader):

> A girl cannot be called a miracle. If a girl is to be called a miracle, then you might call pretty nearly anything a miracle [...] That is just it: you might. You can. You ought. Amid all the miracles of the universe you had just wakened up to one. You were full of your discovery. […] The makers of literature are those who have seen and felt the miraculous interestingness of the universe. (Bennett, 5, 6)

Crucially, however, the awakening to the 'miraculous interestingness of the universe' is something that can occur before any reading takes place and on an entirely subjective level: '*you* might call pretty nearly anything a miracle'. What literature does, in Bennett's formulation, is present a series of interesting case studies as to what individuals 'might' experience or might already have experienced *for themselves.*

One might say Bennett locates programmatic study within the bounds of the school curriculum, but sees 'culture' ('literary taste') itself not as something attained through passive consumption of cultural artefacts, but as something equally marked

within the particular reading practices brought to bear upon those artefacts. Thus, '[p]eople who regard literary taste simply as an accomplishment, and literature simply as a distraction, will never truly succeed either in acquiring the accomplishment or in using it half-acquired as a distraction' (Bennett, 1). Study and relaxation ('accomplishment' and 'distraction') are not inimical in Bennett's formulation – culture, as embodied in a way of reading, enriches both:

> The aim of literary study is not to amuse the hours of leisure; it is to awake oneself, [...] to intensify one's capacity for pleasure, for sympathy, and for comprehension. It is not to affect one hour, but twenty-four hours. An understanding appreciation of literature means an understanding appreciation of the world, and it means nothing else. (Bennett, 7)

Leonard's encounter with the Schlegel sisters dramatises Bennett's argument by laying bare the dimness with which Leonard apprehends his own desires and exposing as flawed his conception of culture as a series of texts whose passive consumption will lead directly to an improvement in his mode of existence. Justifying to the sisters his decision to undertake an all-night ramble through London and out into the wooded countryside beyond Wimbledon, Leonard invokes the texts this nocturnal excursion is designed to emulate: E.V. Lucas's *Open Road* (1899), George Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) and Stevenson's *Prince Otto* (1885) and *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881). The sisters are overjoyed to discover, however, that Leonard has been disappointed in matching up, with the experience itself, the cultural construction of walking tours gained from his reading of these classic literary accounts:

'But was the dawn wonderful?' asked Helen.

With unforgettable sincerity he replied, 'No.' The word flew again like a pebble from the sling. Down toppled all that had seemed ignoble or literary in his talk[.] […] In the presence of these women Leonard had arrived, and he spoke with a flow, an exultation, that he had seldom known.

As the conversation progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that it is not the passive absorption of 'literary' ideas that will enable Leonard to 'push his head out of the grey waters and see the universe', but rather the testing of those ideas for himself (*Howards End*, 126).

Yet Leonard seems determined to cling to the books he has studied. In seeking to transcend his dull existence, he is adamant that this literal attempt to break out of the metropolitan gloom under cover of darkness is merely the enactment of 'something of Richard Jefferies' rather than an experience uniquely his own. Helen objects, arguing that Leonard's determination to meander nocturnally actually comes 'from something far greater', but it is no good – Leonard's 'arrival' is short lived and he has soon trapped himself once more in 'a swamp of books' (*Howards End*, 126).

What the sisters recognise – as Leonard fails to – is that physical adventure itself confirms his 'cultured' status in a way his list of books fails to do. At the mention of *Otto*, Helen Schlegel and her brother Tibby 'groaned gently' and when Lucas is mentioned, Helen intercedes: 'No doubt it's another beautiful book, but I'd rather hear about your road' (*Howards End*, 125). Helen's insistence that Leonard tell them about his own 'road' (and not about the books that inspired him to take it) indicates the literary metaphor at work in his night-time ramble, which represents his reluctance to move beyond what others have written of their own experiences, to focus instead upon

what he experiences himself. Ultimately, in his reading as in his walk, Leonard 'always meant to go off the roads, but the worst of it is that it's more difficult to find one's way' (*Howards End*, 126). The metaphor of reading as a ramble is carried over into the narrator's insistence that authors 'mean us to use [their books] for sign-posts, and are not to blame if […] we mistake the sign-post for the destination':

> Leonard had reached the destination. […] [H]e had troubled to go and see for himself. Within his cramped little mind dwelt something that was greater than Jefferies' books – the spirit that led Jefferies to write them; and his dawn, though revealing nothing but monotones, was part of the eternal sunrise that shows George Borrow Stonehenge. (*Howards End*, 127)

What literature reveals, argues the passage, is not the specific or inherent beauty of that which writers have looked upon or imagined, but 'the spirit' that initially 'led' them to think them worth writing about at all – 'something greater' which it behoves readers to carry beyond the hour of literary study to permeate the entire twenty-four hours of their existence. Culture is located in a way of 'seeing' to which books contain the 'sign-posts', but to which the act of reading is also subordinate. Books do not reveal culture to the readers as a *fait accompli*. Rather, culture is redefined as an ongoing practice – the ability not only constantly to compare textual content with personal experience, but also to acquire sufficient experience to perform such a comparison.

Thus, Leonard's rejection of the dawn's beauty signals his cultural 'arrival' because it signals a realisation not only that his own experience counts but also that it may differ from Borrow's, Stevenson's and the rest. Cultural attainment, in this passage, is not correctly to apprehend something 'great writers' already know – a

cultural standard already there to be surveyed and unearthed – but a willingness to follow the 'sign-posts' and to 'see' for oneself. As Helen argues, Leonard 'doesn't want more books, but to read books rightly' (*Howards End*, 139) – but as long as books are placed on a pedestal, set apart from the very experiences they actually inflect and transform, they are nothing more than useless 'husks' that clog up Leonard's brain and prevent him from encountering 'the real thing' on his own terms (*Howards End*, 150). To 'read books rightly', here, is to be inquisitive and critical, rather than passive, not only succumbing to culture's suggestive 'sign-posts', but also allowing one's own experience to dictate the destination – to breathe new life into old texts.

ii. Curiosities of Research: The scholarly and the literary in Forster and M.R. James

It might initially seem that Forster's examination of Leonard's reading habits could not be further removed from the supernatural fiction of the palaeographer, Montague Rhodes James. Leonard is younger, less leisured and less educated than James's protagonists, the question of whose education is, quite literally, academic. His tales deal with men (and they are always men) who are eminent scholars, librarians, antiquaries, college fellows or even, in some cases, all of these. Yet, their concern with their protagonists' attitudes to the interpretation of ancient texts allows an unexpected connection to be drawn between James's academics and Leonard Bast.[233]

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[233] It should be noted that to read *Howards End* as I have done is almost certainly to read it against the grain. In *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), Jonathan Rose argues convincingly that the novel's attitude to Leonard is not a critique of the working-class reader's lack of autonomy within a system that enshrines reading as the instrument of an already-determined 'culture'. Rather, it is a reflection of Forster's own scepticism regarding the working-class reader's innate ability to comprehend a culture that is (however liberally defined) the exclusive purview of the rentier class represented by the Schlegels – the class to which Forster himself belonged (402-403). My contention, however, is that whatever its author's intention, *Howards End* reflects concerns about the narrow delineation of the function of reading in a manner that unites a range

In 1919, James published *The Wanderings and Homes of Manuscripts*, a short volume designed to provide prospective textual scholars with an outline of some of the issues surrounding 'the survival and transmission of ancient literature' and to provide 'some helps for tracing out their history'.[234] *Wanderings* is designed as an outline of good academic practice in palaeography, in contrast to *Literary Taste*'s preoccupation with the avocational study of literary texts in modern printed editions. Yet both emphasise, with *Howards End*, the significance of individual practice in the production of meaning through study – the importance of 'seeing for oneself'. In a concluding section entitled 'Curiosities of Research', James urges his readers:

> Be inquisitive. See books for yourself; do not trust that the cataloguer has told you everything. I am a cataloguer myself, and I know that, try as he may, a worker of that class cannot hope to know or to see every detail that is of importance. The creature is human, and on some days his mind is less alert than on others. (James, *Wanderings*, 95)

As the passage illustrates, *Wanderings* is more than just a guide to the methodology and techniques of bibliographic research, just as *Literary Taste* is more than simply a manual of great works. It is a celebration not only of academic method, but of the scholar's imaginative faculty – the 'curiosity' fundamental to research. 'Curiosity' becomes the antidote to methodological traditions detailed elsewhere in the volume, a reminder that they are to be followed, but also critically challenged by individual scholars. In contrast to 'curiosity', James posits the activity of cataloguers who

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of texts across a wide variety of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century contexts – contexts that extend, socially, far beyond the drawing room of the London clerk.

[234] M.R. James, *The Wanderings and Homes of Manuscripts* (London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919), p. 3. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

document and describe physical texts according to pre-established taxonomies. Likening their work to manual labourer and invoking the language of class discrimination ('a worker of that class') James hints that the effectiveness of academic research depends upon a hierarchy of curiosity, at the bottom of which is the scholar who adheres blindly to prescribed lines, never thinking or looking beyond the physical details he has been trained to observe and document – familiar, in the words of Forster's Margaret Schlegel, only with 'the outsides of books' (*Howards End*, 123).

'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', the first tale in James's first collection *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), dramatises the shortcomings of the cataloguer as a palaeographic labourer. The tale concerns Dennistoun, an antiquarian attached to the University of Cambridge, who arrives in the French town of St Bertrand de Comminges, intent on 'fill[ing] a notebook' with details about the antiquities and architecture of its magnificent cathedral.[235] Recognising the Englishman as an '*amateur des vieux livres*' ('a lover of old books') the sacristan invites him to view a particular curio in his own possession – a collection of excerpts from illuminated manuscripts, assembled by the seventeenth-century canon, Alberic de Mauléon, including a striking picture of King Solomon passing judgment on a frightful, hairy demon (*Count Magnus*, 4). Spotting the book's incalculable value at once, Dennistoun offers to purchase the volume. After some persuasion, the sacristan agrees. Later on, however, Dennistoun comes to regret his decision when the creature from the drawing appears to him as he peruses the book in his hotel room. Happily, he is rescued by two of the hotel's servants, allowing him to return to England in possession of his prize.

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[235] M.R. James, 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', *Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories: The Complete Ghost Stories of M.R. James, Volume 1*, ed. S.T. Joshi (NY: Penguin, 2005), pp. 1-13 (1). The volume collects the tales from *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904) and *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911). Unless otherwise stated, further references to James's stories are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

Upon finding the eponymous scrapbook, Dennistoun quickly identifies the provenance not only of the book itself, but also of the precious fragments contained therein, allowing him intuitively to construct a tentative catalogue (*Count Magnus*, 6). As Janet Backhouse has noted, Dennistoun's 'cherished dreams of finding priceless manuscripts in untrodden corners of France' (*Count Magnus*, 4) reflect not merely 'James's own bibliophile's pipe dream, but also the abiding excitement and delight with which he himself explored the raw materials on which his life's work was based'.[236] Yet Dennistoun's 'cherished dreams' are also the starting point for the tale's meditation upon the disappointing limitations with which he binds himself in his failure to read the scrapbook as an imaginatively suggestive narrative, preferring instead to categorise it, according to a pre-existing set of palaeographic taxonomies, as a mere object. His reading is scholarly but partial, as he places a bibliographic list of the book's physical components in hierarchical ascendance above the imaginatively apprehended reality of that which they chronicle as text – including, damagingly the reality of the late owner's demoniacal proclivities.

In fact, the tale presents Dennistoun's approach as simultaneously a rigorous, if hubristic, act of scholarly analysis and a catastrophically obtuse lack of imaginative discretion. This is emphasised by the way in which the narrative contrasts the protagonist's own attitude with the reactions of others, who view the scrapbook and its hideous contents with greater caution: the sacristan and his family, who handle the fragment (and the book containing it) with abject fear; the narrator, who recalls the 'despair of conveying by any words the impression which this figure makes upon anyone who looks at it' (*Count Magnus,* 8; my emphasis). Dennistoun's elision of a

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[236] Janet Backhouse, 'Manuscripts on Display: Some Landmarks in Exhibition and Popular Publication of Illuminated Books' in *The Legacy of M.R. James*, ed. Lynda Dennison (Donnington: Shaun Tyas, 2001), pp. 37-52 (39).

readerly engagement with the events inscribed within the object-as-text is thus at odds with absolutely everyone else who sees it. As a result, his obsessive placement of the book-as-object within established palaeographical taxonomies, though methodologically efficient, proves misguided within the context of the tale itself.

James's tale might be said to perform imaginative work inimical to palaeography: an antiquarian discipline which, by its very nature, concerns itself more with the history of the book as a physical artefact than with the literary quality of the text it carries. At the same time, however, this departure from what might methodologically be expected of the antiquarian scholar allows one to read the title of the collection in which the tale appears, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, as suggestive not only of the provenance of its author, but also of an antiquary's particular demons. In staging the return of what is repressed in Dennistoun's reading experience – an imaginative engagement with the book's literary or narrative qualities – the tale exploits the liminal quality which, because of its 'peculiar status as a material object which carries explicit, decodable symbolic information', differentiates the antiquarian book from other relics of historical material cultures.[237] As John Bennet points out, the antiquarian book, more than any other relic, demands to be read as a text, as well as valued as a physical object. Ancient texts are 'perhaps unique' among archaeological objects 'in conveying a meaning explicitly by means of language'. They may not be the only example of archaeological 'texts' – as Bennet points out, all relics 'carry a symbolic meaning' and are, thus, textual.[238] Yet, in being so *manifestly* textual, ancient books emphasise the way in which all relics demand not only to be documented, but also to be 'read' – to be engaged with imaginatively as texts that still have something to offer the reader in the present. Not all of James's stories deal with haunted books but,

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[237] John Bennet, 'Archaeology and Texts', p. 2.
[238] Ibid.

because of the book's unique status as both text and object, it obtains currency as a
metaphor for the textuality of artefacts more generally, which underpins the rest of the
stories in the volume.[239]

Matthew Johnson's recent theoretical assessment of archaeological approaches
to prehistoric artefacts reiterates and develops Bennet's point, arguing that 'reading' the
past poses an epistemological problem that cannot be solved merely by a turn to
material evidence. Objects, Johnson points out, do not signify by themselves – it
therefore behoves archaeologists 'to view artefacts like literary texts, to "read" them as
we would a piece of writing, and so begin to uncover the rich complexity of past
cultural meanings'.[240] At the same time, however, it must be borne in mind that '*[o]ur
beloved artefacts actually belong to the present*. They exist in the here and now'.[241]
Thus, one must not 'fall into the trap of believing that the very physicality of the
archaeological material will in itself tell us what the past was like'.[242] Yet, neither must
we assume that to 'read' objects 'as we would a piece of writing' will achieve what
formal description of the object will not – that imaginative engagement with the object
as aesthetically engaging text will 'in itself tell us what the past was like'. Instead,

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[239] Even when the tales do not specifically deal with valuable and rare books or manuscripts, the ways in
which objects are 'read' or interpreted is always significant in each of the eight stories that make up
Ghost Stories of an Antiquary. Count Magnus's tomb, in the story that bears his name, is covered in
engravings, which warn the observer of the demonic horrors that haunt its occupier; the whistle in '"Oh
Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad"' is inscribed with an ominous Latin script that provides a clue to
the object's horrific secret. Even when there is no haunted object, or when the object is not explicitly
presented as textual, textuality still plays an important part in events. In 'Lost Hearts', the protagonist's
villainous uncle is so 'wrapped up in his books' that, unlike his fiction-reading ward, he fails to imagine
the visceral horrors represented by the spectres he conjures (*Count Magnus*, 15); in both 'Number 13'
and 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas', the clue to the spectre's nature is provided by the protagonist's
research among ancient texts; in 'The Ash Tree', the ancient tradition of *sortes* (the use of a randomly-
selected set of Biblical passages to tell one's fortune) plays a significant role in proceedings. Although
space permits a close analysis of only a small number of James's tales, I would argue that my reading of
the tales as a critique of the too-rigid approach of dull scholars to antiquarian objects – an approach
which books, objects that most obviously parade their dual nature as both material and textual remnants,
come particularly to symbolise – underpins James's fiction as a whole.
[240] Matthew Johnson, *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd Edition (Oxford and Chichester:
Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 16.
[241] Ibid. p. 12; Johnson's emphasis.
[242] Ibid. p. 13.

Johnson's suggestion that the past be 'read' recommends an acknowledgement, in any attempt to 'read' the past through its material remains, of the reader's necessary presence. 'Reading' is thus a convenient contrast to the antiquarian ethos underlying Dennistoun's palaeography, because it reminds one of the inevitable textuality of objects. In doing so, it emphasises that the past asserts itself not directly, as a residual essence in historical objects, but through the imaginative connections made by the reader.

In *Howards End*, the idea of the reader's complicity in the production of textual meaning is suggested when Leonard reads Ruskin in his flat. The narrator describes the author's voice:

> full of high purpose, full of beauty, full even of sympathy and the love of men, yet somehow eluding all that was actual and insistent in Leonard's life. For it was the voice of one who had never been dirty or hungry, and had not guessed successfully what dirt and hunger are. (*Howards End*, 62)

Ruskin has not the key to what is 'actual and insistent' in Leonard's situation. Leonard, therefore, who *has* known what it is to be hungry and dirty, possesses knowledge that Ruskin does not. Yet, he is determined to separate that knowledge – a 'passionate', deeply felt apprehension of a reality that is his and not Ruskin's – from the 'high purpose', the 'beauty', the 'sympathy and the love of men', which he recognises in Ruskin's text. It is an approach that entraps Leonard in the 'daily grey' from which he hopes to escape because it ensures that, for him, Ruskin speaks only of experiences beyond the clerk's reach. Leonard's 'reality', is never allowed to encroach on the cultural splendour of the book, with the inevitable result that this very splendour is

never allowed to encroach on what, for him, constitutes 'reality'. The passage implies

not only that Ruskin and Leonard will remain inevitably and fundamentally at odds, but

also that this continued disjunction is Leonard's own fault. He is all too willing to treat

his books as relics of a reified literary culture, just as James's protagonists are content

to view palaeographic sources as remnants of material cultures already reified through

the definitive work of previous palaeographers. In both cases, that the reader's

immediate situation might have any bearing upon the meaning of the text is utterly

denied, with the result that the text itself remains inevitably 'other' to the reader's

experience.

In this sense, James and Forster prefigure not only the challenges posed by

modern archaeological theory to conventional ways of reading the past, but also

modern reader response theory as it applies to literary texts. Wolfgang Iser, for

example, argues that the text simply offers 'schematized aspects' through which 'the

aesthetic object of the work can be produced'.[243] The 'work', insofar as it is defined by

its 'meaning', is thus, for Iser, a virtual construction that relies on the presence not only

of the specific text but of a specific reader before it can become an 'aesthetic object'.

This is not to deny the significance, in themselves, of either reader or text – rather, it is

simply to emphasise that 'if one loses sight of the relationship [between text and

reader], one loses sight of the virtual work':

> separate analysis [of either text or reader] would only be conclusive if the
>
> relationship were that of transmitter and receiver […] ensuring accurate
>
> communication since the message would only be travelling one way. In literary

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[243] Wolfgang Iser, 'Interaction between Text and Reader' in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 106-19 (106).

works, however, the message is transmitting two ways, in that the reader 'receives' it by composing it.[244]

To use Iser's terms, therefore, it might be argued that both Dennistoun and Leonard Bast share a failure to recognise that the transmission of meaning is not a one way process – that meaning is constructed on terms set not only by the text, but by the individual reader. Leonard, however, sees Ruskin's experiences of Venice as entirely incompatible with his own 'grey' existence, while Dennistoun views the supernatural element of the Biblical snippets collected by the Canon as the superstition of a dead age, to be studied objectively, but which no longer retains any significance for him as a denizen of the present. *The Stones of Venice* and the Canon's scrapbook are never engaged with critically because their readers persist in asserting their irrelevance to their own temporal or social contexts – the perspectives unique to their situation as readers. In acting as if a particular kind of text might, in itself and without any engagement on the part of the reader, reveal the secrets of a culture either temporally or socially 'other' to the reader's own, the palaeographer and the auto-didactic literary scholar become prey to the same pitfall.

On the back of the drawing of the demon, for example, Canon Alberic has written, in Latin, a record of his conversation with the creature whom he has summoned (it is implied) as an aid to finding treasure. Later in the tale, the reality of the creature implies the unexpected validity of this unearthly conversation – at the very least, it upsets the notion that medieval demonology is mere folklore or, indeed, that there is anything 'mere' about folklore. For Dennistoun, however, the fragment has little value when read as an aesthetic production that still speaks of the fantastic event of which it is

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[244] Iser, p. 107.

a record. As evidence of what people used to think, it elides the fear that must surely have obtained when those beliefs were held to be literally true. Instead, the imaginative currency of the text (the idea that it could be the record of a supernatural treasure-hunt that had indeed occurred and is thus the record of powers familiar to antiquity but lost to the modern world) is dismissed to the realm of fiction when Dennistoun remarks: 'A good specimen of the treasure-hunter's record – quite reminds one of Mr. Minor-Canon Quatermain in *Old St. Paul's*' (*Count Magnus*, 7).[245] Yet, as the tale subsequently demonstrates, such details, apparently only fit for the realm of imaginative literature, would also, in this case, be wholly appropriate to the understanding of the historical document's cultural provenance. Collapsing Dennistoun's clean division, as a reader, between modern fiction and ancient texts, James's tale both foreshadows and supplements his later emphasis upon the 'curiosity' that required the palaeographer to leave out no part of his own experience in his consideration of the ancient book; in his ghost stories, such experience also include his experiences as a reader of other kinds of texts.

When James's antiquary-protagonists are caught in the act of fiction-reading, the protagonist's sense of the heightened triviality of the fiction-reading moment and of the reading material itself still obtains as a contrast with the worthier and more involved examination of antiquarian documents. In 'Number 13', for example, Anderson's nocturnal reading habits are in direct contrast to the intense study of church records that he undertakes during the working day. The papers he has come to Viborg to study are avowedly 'far more numerous and interesting than he had at all anticipated' (*Count Magnus,* 54). His bedtime reading, on the other hand, is merely 'a necessary

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[245] W. H. Ainsworth's historical romance *Old St. Paul's* (1841) which, with its occult-dabbling, treasure-hunting cleric and a setting almost contemporary with Canon Alberic's demonic consultation, recalls the events documented in the scrapbook fragment.

preliminary to sleep' and does not merit such detailed attention. There is one book 'which alone would satisfy him at the present moment', the book which he had been reading on the train. The particular character of the book is ultimately unimportant, however, the novel fulfilling only Anderson's desire for an anonymous 'few pages of print'. The imaginative act of reading for pleasure is portrayed as a ritualistic one, requiring little in the way of engagement and made up of endlessly-rehearsed actions: 'he had been in bed for some minutes, had read his wonted three or four pages of his book, blown out his light, and turned over to go to sleep' (*Count Magnus*, 53).

During his researches, Anderson has become especially interested in a series of letters concerning 'a house owned by the Bishop, but not inhabited by him, in the town […] [and whose] tenant was apparently somewhat of a scandal and a stumbling-block to the reforming party. He was a disgrace, they wrote, to the city; he practised secret and wicked arts, and had sold his soul to the enemy' (*Count Magnus*, 54). Intrigued, Anderson is determined to discover the house's location and learn more about its mysterious former tenant. He makes enquiries of the archivist, who informs him that, unfortunately, 'of the old terrier of the Bishop's property which was made in 1560, […] just the piece which had the list of the town property is missing'. Even so, the archivist concludes hopefully, perhaps he will 'some day succeed to find him' ('Number 13', 55).

Anderson shares the archivist's optimism but in seeking to make such a breakthrough he searches in the wrong place. In fact the spirit of the Bishop's tenant (the Faust-like Nicholas Franken) resides not within the antiquary's written sources but in the intermittently-existent room Number 13 of the hotel at which he is staying. Moreover, it is during the apparently insignificant evening ritual of reading, that the issue of the ambiguity surrounding the existence of room Number 13 strikes the

scholar: 'not before, did it occur to him that, whereas on the blackboard of the hotel there had been no Number 13, there was undoubtedly a room numbered 13 in the hotel' (*Count Magnus*, 55). Anderson comes nearer to discovering the only extant trace of Franken's habitation after a brief reading of his 'trivial' railway novel than he does in a morning's research in the church archives. His willingness to allow his approach to reading to be governed by a too-rigid interpretative taxonomy not only prevents him from finding the one thing for which, in his researches, he is most ardently searching, but also, in blinding him to the very real dangers of Franken's satanic proclivities, very nearly ends his life.

What is at stake in these tales is not simply the usefulness of particular kinds of text to the discovery of a manuscript or of new historical data. Rather, it is the kind of reading habitually regarded by antiquaries as most suited to the task at hand. A useful terminology for the distinctions incumbent on this ethos is established in another 'antiquarian' ghost story from the period – John Meade Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895). Falkner's novel involves an Oxford student, Sir John Maltravers, who becomes possessed by the spirit of Adrian Temple, the debauched former owner of the eponymous violin, which he finds lodged in a hidden compartment in the walls of his university accommodation. Alongside the violin is a diary in which Temple has chronicled his licentious activities – activities that Sir John finds himself compelled to re-enact. This new enthusiasm for ancient texts not as the relics of a long-dead age, but as works that still speak to the imaginative life of the reader in the present, also extends to Sir John's appreciation of the remnants, both material and textual, of classical antiquity. Sir John's friend Gaskell is scandalised to find his companion devouring

'classical literature […] no longer from the scholarly but the literary standpoint'.[246]
This 'literary' engagement with classical texts also permeates Sir John's obsession with
the past's material remains. He purchases a villa near Baia in Italy, the 'most luxurious
and wanton of all sites of antiquity'. The town was sacked in the fifteenth century, but
an intense desire to experience for himself the seamier side of classical culture allows
Sir John to appreciate that 'a continuity of wickedness' between past and present 'is not
so easily broken'. For Sir John, who has abandoned the 'scholarly' for the 'literary', the
events of antiquity are as resonant in and for the nineteenth-century context in which
they are recalled as they were in the century in which they were originally committed
and, indeed, committed *to paper* – so much so that, for Gaskell, his friend's re-
enactment of the licentious past reveals an Italian coast 'haunted' by 'a spirit of
corruption and debasement actually sensible and oppressive' (Falkner, 140).

A 'spirit' (even more 'sensible and oppressive') also pervades the books read by
James's protagonists. The Jamesian spectre, erupting upon the scene of protagonists'
reading, represents the return of a repressed spirit of 'literary' engagement, elided in the
antiquary's determination to regard historical relics as 'scholarly' materials which make
the past visible but which fail to facilitate an imaginative grasp upon its once visceral
reality. The threatened eruption of the past upon the present – a staple of the ghost story
– thus attains a special significance in James's tales, which differ from Falkner's novel
in their implication that properly to approach a text as 'literary' is also imaginatively to
re-enact it as 'literal': to reconcile it with the reader's personal situation and experience,
rather than simply to regard it as fundamentally and irretrievably 'other' to that
experience.

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[246] John Meade Falkner, *The Lost Stradivarius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946), p. 139. Further
references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

This placement of the 'literary' engagement as entwined with – rather than necessarily contrary to – the more obviously 'scholarly' aspects of the antiquary's work is evidenced in the nightly ranging over 'a few pages of print' undertaken by Anderson in 'Number 13'. This apparently inconsequential bed-time activity actually announces an acquaintance with the past far more tangible than that provided by his fruitless researches amongst the nominally more valuable texts in the town archives – the latter unexpectedly blinds while the former just as unexpectedly enlightens, so that 'literary' engagement, so conspicuously avoided during the academic's working hours, yields precisely the results a 'scholarly' engagement fails to elicit. Similarly unwilling to bring his experiences as a reader of popular fiction to bear, Dennistoun entertains, only to reject, a 'literary' engagement with Alberic's scrapbook, preferring to rely exclusively on established 'scholarly' methodologies. What both tales point to, therefore, is the unhelpful demarcation their protagonists make between a scholarly engagement that constitutes antiquarianism as a profession and a literary engagement consigned exclusively to the purview of the hours of leisure. In failing to comply with this demarcation, the spectres signal its falsity. The ghost of Nicholas Franken is present (in different ways) in the church papers researched by Anderson and in the hotel to which he retires after his day's research; in 'Canon Alberic', the imaginary demons that haunt Dennistoun's leisure reading are unexpectedly paralleled by the real demon that haunts the book he investigates professionally.

Of course, the circumstances of the tales' composition would seem to give the lie to this thesis, indicating, as they do, their author's own easy demarcation of the spheres of work and leisure, of vocation and avocation. A palaeographer by profession, James dismissed his stories as insignificant fictions, designed purely to make the reader 'feel pleasantly uncomfortable when walking along a solitary road at nightfall, or sitting

over a dying fire in the small hours'.[247] His first collection was only submitted for publication at all as a posthumous tribute to its illustrator, James McBryde.[248] Yet, while it is certainly true, as Julia Briggs has noted, that James's tales were 'simply the bagatelle for an idle hour, […] a delicate edifice of suspense with which to entertain the young people whose company he so much enjoyed', it would be mistaken to claim, as Peter Penzoldt does, that James's fictional output consists merely of 'straightforward tales of terror and the supernatural, utterly devoid of any deeper meaning'.[249] In fact, the deployment of the supernatural in the tales works to destabilise the very taxonomy that allows Briggs (and, implicitly in his preface, James himself) to dismiss them as the work of an 'idle hour'. It is highly significant, for example, that the situations engendered in James's preface describe moments at which readers are likely to find themselves in a position of liminality – 'a solitary road at nightfall', 'a dying fire in the small hours' – caught between one's home and one's destination, between night and day. Indeed, ghosts are themselves figures of liminality – incongruous mixtures of the seen and the unseen, the living and the dead, that challenge accepted systems of classification. Ultimately, the tales themselves are caught between the realms of James's own authorial avocation and his academic vocation, produced according to the 'literary' engagement with his subject that characterised the former, whilst enacting a commentary on the 'scholarly' engagement that characterised the latter.

Indeed, 'Number 13' provides a pre-echo of Frank Swinnerton's linking of whisky and soda with Wells's 'weary giant' theory to signal the leisure hour as the proper domain of the 'literary' engagement with text. When, in 'Number 13', Anderson finishes his 'scholarly' perusal of the archives, the first thing he does is order 'a whisky

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[247] James, Preface to *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904) in *Count Magnus*, p. 254.
[248] See James's preface to the volume and Michael Cox, *M.R. James: An Informal Portrait* (OUP, 1986), p. 139.
[249] Quoted in S.T. Joshi, 'Introduction' to *Count Magnus*, pp. vii-xvii (xi).

and soda' (*Count Magnus*, 61), a mind-numbing drink that ushers in the trivial pleasures of the leisure hour and the end of the work period, but which also demarcates both as the respective realms to which the trivial and the serious are separately confined. It also signals the first appearance of Nicholas Franken's spirit, as the figure around which Anderson's researches have failed to yield results now appears to him as a fully-formed image, whose silhouette is projected from the adjacent room onto the wall opposite his window. The search for Franken being so much the purview of Anderson's scholarly work, he is no longer on the lookout for that elusive figure. It is not that Anderson displays a lack of imagination – on the contrary, his thoughts turn to Ann Radcliffe's romances and he is inspired by the poetic efforts of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*'s heroine to compose an impromptu ditty on the strange activities of the occupant of the room next door (*Count Magnus*, 61).[250] A turn to the imaginative state of mind associated with 'literary' texts like Radcliffe's allows him to 'see for himself' the very thing that eludes him in the scholarly perusal of the accepted sources; but his inability to associate Franken with the literary realm of gothic terror means that he fails to recognise that the object of his literary imaginings is also the object of his scholarly research. The two spheres remain incompatible, and Franken stands here for the liminal space between the scholarly and the literary approaches to the past as text, literally residing within a void between two firmly demarcated spaces.

The use of whisky and soda to signal a particular kind of reading is also deployed in 'The Mezzotint', another story from James's first collection, the central device of which – an art object that continually changes its appearance – is entirely in keeping with the recurring theme of academics whose scholarly endeavours invite supernatural reprisals by threatening to close off the textual (or 'literary') signification

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[250] The intertext with Radcliffe is especially appropriate since her novels are not just imaginative works in themselves, but also utilise ancient texts and documents to imaginative effect.

of material relics. Williams, the tale's antiquary-protagonist, fails to notice the third change in the picture because he is 'just then busy giving whisky-and-soda to others of the company, and was unable to come across the room to look at the view again' (*Count Magnus*, 29). Once more, the drink signals not only the approach of the leisure hour, but also the dulling of the critical faculties that comes with the demarcation of the scholarly from the literary. This particular mezzotint requires more detailed attention than Williams, now at leisure, is prepared to give it, challenging his readiness to revoke the scholarly at the end of the working day.

The differentiation between 'literary' and 'scholarly' engagement is also explicitly foregrounded in 'Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance', the final tale in James's *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911). On his first night in residence at his newly-inherited country house, Humphreys's neighbour Mr Cooper suggests that he might want to spend it relaxing with a book: 'Hardly anything to my mind can compare with a good hour's reading after a hard day's work; far better than wasting the whole evening at a friend's house'. Unfortunately, Humphreys is denied this opportunity, since his butler, Carlton, 'was evidently inclined for occasional conversation'. Otherwise, 'he would have finished the novel he had bought for his journey' (*Count Magnus*, 227). Instead, he makes a perusal of the library, a chamber in which he 'had all the predisposition to take [an] interest'. Yet, 'interest' is quickly replaced by the 'systematic acquaintance' of scholarly description:

> [H]e had learned from Cooper that there was no catalogue save the very
> superficial one made for purposes of probate. The drawing up of a *catalogue*
> *raisonné* would be a delicious occupation for winter. There were probably

treasures to be found, too: even manuscripts, if Cooper might be trusted. (*Count*

Magnus, 228)

While novels are for reading, Humphreys's first inclination when he finds himself in a

library of antiquarian volumes is to survey and catalogue the books as objects. The

reference to the library's 'treasures' – like Dennistoun's dreams of literary discovery –

hint at the promise of material acquisition rather than literary engagement, since

scholarly engagement is, here, the process by which the cataloguer makes 'systematic

acquaintance' with texts in a collection. It is, in short, in direct contrast to the 'good

hour's reading after a hard day's work' that makes up the 'literary' engagement that

novels invite. Later, the tale implies more explicitly the dangerous hauntings

encouraged by this too systematic approach as a terrifying spectre emerges from the

centre of a plan that Humphreys has been constructing of the maze in the grounds,

disrupting his impulse to catalogue and document rather than imaginatively to engage

with the relics around him – a reluctance already marked by his earlier rejection of a

literary in favour of a scholarly perusal of books.

The linking of the scholarly with work and the literary with leisure has an

impact on reading in both spheres, which recalls Bennett's anxieties about the way in

which the 'attainment' of 'literary taste' was predicated upon avoiding a reductive view

of reading as merely the 'distraction' of the 'leisure hour'. In James's fiction, scholarly

method is itself an 'accomplishment', which renders literature a mere 'distraction' in

comparison. Scholarly reading sets up the text-as-historical-document as the other of

the text-as-literature, and thus sets the scene for the return of that repressed other. At

the same time, this process means that readings of texts traditionally reserved

exclusively for literary perusal – Radcliffe, Ainsworth, railway novels – are just as

persistently haunted by the scholarly ends of the antiquary, whose academic 'accomplishments' intrude upon these apparently literary encounters. If James's stories utilise supernatural motifs to metonymise the haunting presence of the literary within the scholarly, therefore, they also emphasise the abiding presence of the scholarly within the literary. Their determination to uphold a strict delineation between the scholarly and the literary means that interpretation can never 'truly succeed', for the Jamesian protagonist, as either a scholarly accomplishment or as a literary distraction (Bennett, 3). Thus, the haunted book becomes a metonym for reading as an experience that, because of an appropriated taxonomy of 'appropriate' practices, is always haunted.

So it is in Forster's fiction. The tendency to separate the literary from the scholarly in reading and to foreground the latter over the former characterises, for example, the behaviour of the studious Mr Bons in 'The Celestial Omnibus' (1908). The story concerns a boy (never named) who is intrigued by a mysterious signpost that has appeared on a street near his middle-class suburban home. Pointing up 'a blank alley', the words 'To Heaven' are 'painted on it, in faded characters'.[251] Following the sign, the boy is intrigued to discover an advertisement for an omnibus service, leaving at sunset and sunrise each day. His parents and neighbours ridicule him for taking the notice seriously – but the omnibus not only turns up as advertised, but also has as its driver the author Sir Thomas Browne and its destination is a literary heaven peopled by characters from literature. Upon returning, the boy is dismayed that no one believes his tale. Eventually Mr Bons, a scholarly neighbour, agrees to go with the boy at sunset to test his account and is amazed to find the omnibus just as the boy described it. Finding the driver of the coach to be the poet Dante, Bons is initially awe-struck, then terrified.

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[251] Forster, 'The Celestial Omnibus' in *E.M. Forster: The New Collected Short Stories*, ed. P.N. Furbank (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1985), pp. 46-61 (46). Further references to Forster's short stories are to this edition and appear in the text.

Stepping out of the omnibus onto the mountainside where the entrance to the literary heaven is guarded by Achilles, Bons falls straight through the rock as though it were water, crashing to his death on the London street far below.

As Nicole duPlessis points out in a recent analysis, Forster's tale delivers an allegory of reading, which 'subverts the position of the educated reader, substituting instead instinctive, spiritual response and emotional investment in reading'. Her analysis overlaps with my own reading of the figure of the scholarly reader in James's fiction. She points to the tale's presentation of Mr Bons as one who 'values books as much (if not more) for their costliness as objects […] [as for] their content'.[252] Bons boasts about his possession of no less than 'seven Shelleys' – and, confronted with the apparition of Dante, identifies him as the man who wrote 'those vellum books in my library' (*Short Stories*, 57). The physical books are fetishised at the expense of an engagement with their contents as material possession stands in for textual engagement as a sign of cultural attainment. Indeed, it is objectification of texts as the signifiers of an already-determined cultural 'value' that marks the tale's negative account of the 'educated reader' and of 'educated reading' as a practice.

When he realises that the boy's story is true, Bons is disgusted by the lad's inappropriate response to the characters and authors he has met. Faced with Dante, the boy notes that he liked Browne more and expresses a hope that they will meet Mrs Gamp when they reach the literary heaven. Bons is aghast:

'Out there sits the man who wrote my vellum books!' thundered Mr Bons,

'and you talk to me of Dickens and of Mrs Gamp?'

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[252] Nicole duPlessis, 'Transcendence, Transformation, and the Cultural Economy of Literacy in E.M. Forster's "The Celestial Omnibus" and "Other Kingdom"', *Lit: Literature, Interpretation, Theory*, 21:2 (2010), 81-100 (85).

'I know Mrs Gamp so well,' he apologized. 'I could not help being glad to see

her.[…]' (*Short Stories*, 58)

The vellum books stand for the reverence with which Bons treats certain texts as agents

of culture at the expense of the trivialities that characterise apparently lesser works. The

boy, however, knows no such boundaries. His pleasure has been excited by Mrs Gamp,

whom he knows 'so well' and cannot 'help' preferring. He mixes up Achilles and Tom

Jones – both of whom he has met on his previous visit, and the latter of whom he

affectionately recalls playfully challenging in a race. Mr Bons is again frustrated. As a

cultured man, not only would he have disdained the company of novelistic creations

like Tom Jones in favour of the 'creations of Homer, of Shakespeare, and of Him who

drives us now', but he 'would not have raced. He would have asked intelligent

questions' (*Short Stories*, 58).

The passage obviously reflects concerns about the uses of literacy, as Bons

locates culture unproblematically within a series of texts of which 'intelligent

questions' can be asked, but with which the direct engagement implied by the idea of

personally *competing* with literary characters, is not considered. This recalls the cultural

programme on which Leonard Bast is engaged, but it also recalls the way in which

James's academic protagonists pursue their researches. Reading is also, for them, the

means by which the 'culture' of the past can be reclaimed as a stable entity by asking

'intelligent questions' of particular kinds of texts within an established methodological

framework. In contrast, the boy's linking of Achilles and Tom Jones as figures

affording equal pleasure signals his lack of education, whilst simultaneously signalling

an idea of education as a series of cultural judgement calls that curb the more subjective

pleasures of personal enjoyment. As duPlessis puts it, the contrasting attitudes to

literature exhibited by the boy and Bons emphasise 'the reader's choice either to experience literature as an adventure – something to be explored, internalised and *liked* […] – or to experience literature as an object to be '"appreciated," "studied" or displayed'.[253]

Mr Bons, who 'presided over the Literary Society', believes himself the arbiter of 'the essential truth of Poetry'. Yet despite his faith in Poetry's ability to enshrine 'essential truth', his position as one who 'presides' over the discussion of texts within a specialised 'Society' betrays the arbitrary codification of literary study that his reign entails. The boy, on the other hand, despairs at Mr Bons's belief in Poetry's 'essential truth'. Returning from the literary heaven, he reads Keats in tears for, as he tells Mr Bons, 'all these words that only rhymed before, now that I've come back they're me' (*Short Stories*, 55). Literature is situated as a real place that anyone can visit – just as a book offers precisely the same material for anyone's perusal – but the boy's sudden awakening to literature also constitutes a realisation that it is entirely possible to experience a book's contents on his own entirely personal terms, as opposed to the objective assessment of conventional stylistic features like rhyme. Bons's attitude, on the other hand, renders imagination redundant in the reading of literary texts – a distraction from the 'essential truth' that great works already contain. He responds to the presence of Dante 'as if he were in church' – as if, that is, he is receiving the logos, the word as pure signifier unmediated by the subjectivity of a reader (*Short Stories*, 57). It is a perspective explicitly denied by Dante in the story, who proclaims: 'I am the means and not the end. I am the food and not the life. Stand by yourself, as this boy has stood. I cannot save you. For poetry is a spirit; and they that would worship it must worship in spirit and in truth' (*Short Stories*, 61). Dante's words recall the narrator of

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[253] Ibid. p. 87.

Howards End, who similarly argues that literature is merely the signpost towards a personal epiphany which, in Iser's terms, gives rise to a 'virtual work' – an amalgamation of the reader's spirit and textual content as the former works upon the latter.

Thus, for Bast, Bons and the Jamesian protagonist, the scholarly fetishisation of the book as object also involves the objectification of particular kinds of texts as the harbingers of 'essential truth'. It overlooks what I have termed the 'literary' impulse – the recognition that textual 'truth' must involve an imaginative leap on the part of the reader who assimilates it. In 'The Celestial Omnibus', the carriage piloted by the author is an obvious metaphor for reading, and the magical rainbow that allows the carriage to ascend to the literary heaven is an equally obvious metaphor for the imaginative leap that allows the reader to interact with, rather than passively to read about, the contents of texts, physically transporting the reader to a space in which active interaction with authors and literary characters becomes possible. Implicitly, the story emphasises reading as the means by which meaning is produced through active participation with texts, rather than discovered within it and passively absorbed.

Just as James's protagonists undergo horrific physical encounters through their tendency to view literary and scholarly approaches as somehow already pre-ascribed to different kinds of text, Forster's characters also suffer physically in a way that emphasises their dedication to books as mere objects to be studied. Both Leonard and Bons render the texts they read as already other to their own personal experience. While the young boy is able to make the imaginative leap that allows him literally to interact with the characters on his own terms – expressing, with a ludicity that terrifies Bons, an arbitrary preference for Dickens over Dante – Bons is unable to accept the leap, both figuratively and literally. The land to which he has journeyed, in which Achilles dallies

with Tom Jones and Dante leads one to Mrs Gamp, is totally beyond his compartmentalised, commodified and, through education, fundamentally *inherited*, idea of what 'literature' is or could ever be.

The boy, lacking education, lacks this idea. If he has not inherited Mr Bons's physical library – his home is conspicuously deficient of 'Shelleys' for example – then neither has he inherited the standard assumptions which Bons automatically applies to the volumes' contents. What Bons does – what the boy does not do – is to unite the literary text and the physical book into one scholarly object, one material unit of 'essential truth'. Reading is, for the boy – figuratively, if not literally, since the boy's 'reading' is present only in a metonymic journey – an imaginative dalliance with characters whom he likes according to a taste entirely his own. Books are not, as they are for Bons and Bast, the end of the journey: they are only its beginning – indeed, so is reading itself, since the journey to the literary heaven is seen to be less important than what one does when one gets there. Unable to adapt to this new conception of reading, Bons resembles Leonard Bast in his inability to conceive of himself as compatible with this other land. Indeed, his inability to think of himself on equal terms with its inhabitants is implied in the way he acts as if 'in church'. In the end, literature, as a land with which one might personally interact, literally disappears from under his feet and he falls to his death. Tellingly, he lands 'in the vicinity of the Bermondsey gas-works' (*Short Stories*, 61) – unable to transcend the materiality of literature and unable to imagine anything but its intrinsic 'otherness' from the quotidian mundanity of his suburban existence, it is entirely appropriate that Bons is flung to earth in one of the 'greyest' locations imaginable.

I emphasise Bons's objectification of text – the way in which his view of literature as 'essential truth' combines text and physical volume in one reified whole –

because it foreshadows the symbolic quality of Leonard's death in the later novel. The scene is set before Leonard's fateful arrival at Howards End, where the Schlegels' possessions have been deposited: 'the bookcases filled the wall opposite the fireplace, and [their] father's sword […] had been drawn from its scabbard and hung naked amongst the sober volumes' (*Howards End*, 266). The volumes are anonymous, presenting a contrast to the sword, which lies 'naked' and bare, its edge exposed, amongst the closed books, contrasting symbols of vital action and 'sober' study. Leonard, unable finally to bring to his reading the imaginative openness with which he approaches his experiences of the road, ensures that books remain closed to him, figuratively if not literally. Their 'nakedness' is covered up, not because he doesn't open the covers, but because he fails to appreciate texts as objects that invite *interaction* as well as passive admiration. It is surely not unreasonable to see a sexual metaphor here. The shining nakedness of the sword can be seen as representing precisely the invitation that is always before Leonard but which he cannot perceive – an invitation to copulate, procreate, to impregnate the 'truth' with his 'spirit', to father the 'virtual work' that is the product of interaction between text and reader. As with James's protagonists, the figurative elision of imaginative literary appreciation in favour of scholarly passivity forcefully recurs, as the 'swamp of books' in which his reading had submerged him figuratively, becomes tragically literal and he is forcibly and literally struck by the books as physical objects – as mere 'husks': 'Books fell over him in a shower. Nothing had sense' (*Howards End*, 315).

John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan's *New History of Early English Drama* contains an essay by Paul Werstine on the study of late-medieval and early-modern

dramatic works in manuscript.[254] Essentially an introduction to a particular branch of palaeographic study, the essay is valuable in the context of the present discussion because it serves to highlight in a little more detail the bibliographic pitfalls outlined by James at the end of his *Wanderings and Homes of Manuscripts* in a manner that also helps to connect his tales to Forster's. According to Werstine, the study of plays in manuscript came into its own in the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, the work of Sir Walter Wilson Greg 'may be credited with having established the study of early modern drama in manuscript as a field of rigorous scholarly inquiry'.[255] Yet while Greg's *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses* (1931) is, by modern researchers, 'easily mistaken for an objective and inclusive survey of its field', not only was its author 'attractively modest about the scope of his undertaking' but, Werstine argues, he neglects many important manuscript holdings – the contents of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, for example, the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, and 'Alnwick Castle, north of Newcastle, where *John of Bordeaux* and *The Wasp* are to be found'.[256] In short, Greg constitutes a practical example of James's insistence upon seeing 'books for yourself', in order to rectify the gaps that, one must assume, might plague even the most respected and trusted survey.

More serious, however, are the flaws inherent in the theory of the production and reproduction of early modern plays in manuscript Greg evolves in his article 'Prompt Copies, Private Transcripts, and the "Playhouse Scrivener"' (1926). According to Werstine, Greg's theory 'is still accepted by many present editors as *the* general theory' of its kind, yet it is 'both logically a priori […] to any survey of the manuscripts and chronologically prior to his own limited survey of them in *Dramatic*

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[254] Paul Werstine, 'Plays in Manuscript', in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. Cox and Kasdan, pp. 481-97.
[255] Ibid. p. 481.
[256] Ibid. p. 483.

Manuscripts'.[257] Werstine stresses that Greg's work can be approached as useful to present scholars only on the important understanding that it is *only* a theory: a useful framework for the palaeographic study of early English manuscript drama, but one whose usefulness must accommodate a full and frank appreciation of the theory's always-tentative nature. In simply applying, without due scepticism and question, a theory developed in particular, temporally localised intellectual conditions, modern scholars not only risk repeating some of Greg's omissions, but also risk 'reproduc[ing] under the guise of general theory the ad hoc rhetorical strategies developed by Greg to counter equally ephemeral observations by his contemporaries':

> Present-day scholars thus face an important choice. On the one hand, there is what I have called Greg's 'general theory,' which reduces a dispersed heterogeneity of manuscripts to the linear simplicity of his narrative, colonizing the manuscripts to make them serve as the sites of clues to the nature of the lost manuscripts that once lay behind plays now available only in printed texts […] On the other hand, there is the irreducible historical messiness of the actual manuscripts, and the economy of hypothesis that Greg so successfully championed.[258]

In Forster's and James's fiction, protagonists face a similar choice. In the case of Bons, literary texts' heterogeneities are elided in favour of a reading that presses them into the service of an 'essential truth' which, in a circular process reminiscent of Wilde's 'Decay of Lying', they actually only enshrine hypothetically. Like Greg's, Bons's theory, as it is pressed upon the boy, precedes any actual perusal of the books

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[257] Ibid. p. 481; Werstine's emphasis.
[258] Ibid. p. 482.

themselves. Bons, like Leonard Bast, reads his books according to a theory of culture as an 'essential truth' that conveniently sidesteps the 'messiness' of the undisciplined heterogeneity embraced by the boy in favour of a theory whose 'economy' renders it expedient for study.

It is this insistence on an expedient economy of interpretation that Forster would later ascribe damningly to the 'pseudo-scholar', who 'classes books before he has understood or read them' – who practises, for example, '[c]lassification by chronology':[259]

> Everything [the pseudo-scholar] says may be accurate but all is useless because he is moving round books instead of through them, he either has not read them or cannot read them properly. Books have to be read (worse luck, for it takes a long time); it is the only way of discovering what they contain. […] He would rather relate a book to the history of its time […] to some tendency. As soon as he can use the word 'tendency' his spirits rise, and though those of his audience may sink, they often pull out their pencils at this point and make a note, under the belief that a tendency is portable. (*Aspects of the Novel*, 13-14)

The conveniently 'portable' nature of Greg's findings – their availability as an expedient reference point for later researchers – finds its echo in Forster. Yet, the passage also echoes James's contention that books 'have to be read' anew by *every* scholar, who must never simply defer to previously-published surveys. Presumably Forster does not mean to imply that 'scholars' literally avoid opening the cover and reading the words on the pages: how else would one assess 'the events it describes'?

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[259] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) (NY: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1954), p. 11. Further references are to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

What is actually at stake here is precisely what is at stake in the anxieties about palaeographic research in James's fiction and in Werstine's essay. James and Werstine both worry that the way in which a tendency to classify books 'before he has understood them' or, in Werstine's estimation, to trust to the classificatory systems of others as a substitute for the critical interaction between text and reader negates the need for a literary reading. Too rigid a demarcation is thus erected between the text as a stable object examined subject to equally stable description by the scholar and the fluid, contingent text whose meanings fluctuate under the gaze of the engaged reader. For Werstine, an unquestioning acceptance of Greg's theory neglects the specificity of the socio-historical conditions that governed Greg's apparently objective analysis. It neglects the role of a specific reader, whose inevitable presence is as necessary for the recovery of the 'essential truth' it just as inevitably mediates; readers, the entire particularity of whose experience (including the experience of other kinds of text) must be brought into play if the 'curiosity' so essential to research and, indeed, to 'reading books rightly', is to be maintained.

Both James and Forster share, therefore, a concern regarding the inevitable limitations that methodologies place upon the production of meaning – especially within the context of approaches to cultural artefacts – and both use books as emblematic of this process by having them challenge their readers in extraordinary ways. Forster's fiction concerns itself with the problems that present themselves when the idea of culture as an 'essential truth' enshrined in particular texts is faithfully believed to be directly available to the educated reader through reading – and, in the process, dramatises his own anxieties that reading is now seen primarily as a tool for the discovery of a truth already other to the specific reader. James's fiction betrays similar anxieties, but does so in a manner that foregrounds concerns about the way in

which the past can be reconstructed through its material remnants and rendered intelligible to 'readers' in the present. In the rest of this chapter, I will argue that such epistemological anxieties give way, in Forster's work, to a wider preoccupation with books as the means by which the cultural 'other' is, paradoxically, both exorcised and understood – anxieties that parallel concerns in James's fiction with the way in which the inevitable 'otherness' of the past is dealt with by the disciplines that arose, by the turn of the twentieth century, to govern its study. While these concerns remain, for James, purely methodological, they lead, in Forster's works, to a conception of the book as the site of an unsettling, but liberating, revelation of the reading subject's inevitable 'otherness'.

iii. 'The cow is there': John Addington Symonds and *The Longest Journey* (1907)

The memoirs of the poet, historian and homosexual campaigner John Addington Symonds (written in 1889, but not published until 1984) contain the following account of a revelatory reading experience:

> It so happened that I stumbled on the *Phaedrus*. I read on and on, till I reached the end. Then I began the *Symposium*; and the sun was shining on the shrubs outside the ground-floor room in which I slept, before I shut the book up. […] It was just as though the voice of my own soul spoke to me through Plato, as though in some antenatal experience I had lived the life of a philosophical Greek lover.

This textual encounter took place shortly before Symonds's final year at Harrow. Whilst attending that institution, Symonds had been shocked at the rampant homoerotic

lust that reigned amongst its all-male attendees. Having come to recognise that his own sexual inclinations were entirely directed towards members of his own sex, he was troubled by the crudity of his fellow students, whose desires appeared only to find expression in behaviour that Symonds could not help but regard as base. His encounter with the Platonic text, however, enacts 'the consecration of a long-cherished idealism': 'I perceived that masculine love had its virtue as well as its vice, and stood in this respect upon the same ground as normal sexual appetite. I understood […] the relation which […] the brutalities of vulgar lust at Harrow bore to my higher aspiration after noble passion'.[260]

Later in his career, Plato's writing formed the basis of a dispute between Symonds and Benjamin Jowett, whose English translations of the texts had become standard. Symonds had asked Jowett whether, in his opinion, the texts posed a danger for any young men who might come into contact with them. Jowett answered in the negative, dismissing the homoerotic strains in Plato as 'mainly a figure of speech'. On the contrary, argued Symonds, no doubt drawing on his own experience of the text, for many young readers Plato's writing represented nothing less than 'a revelation' of the 'throbbing […] realism of Greek life' – especially if the reader shares the homoerotic impulses Plato expresses. For such students, 'there is no question of "figures of speech" but of concrete facts, facts in the social experience of Athens':

> They discover that what they had been blindly groping after was once an admitted possibility – not in a mean hole or corner – but that the race whose literature forms the basis of their higher culture lived in that way, aspired in that way. (*Memoirs*, 100)

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[260] John Addington Symonds, *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds* ed. by Phyllis Grosskurth (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p. 99. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

The danger, for Symonds, does not arise from the desires actually expressed in the text, but from the way in which books chronicling desires utterly taboo for nineteenth-century students are nevertheless presented to them in texts legitimised by their place in a sanctioned curriculum. The result is a 'contest in the soul [which] is terrible':

> Educators, when they diagnose the disease, denounce it. […] [L]aw and social taste are with them, and […] the person incriminated […] has nothing to urge in self-defence – except his inborn instinct, and the fact that those very men who condemn him have placed the most electrical literature of the world in his hands, pregnant with the stuff that damns him.

As the passage argues, the problem arises from the insoluble difference in the educators and a section of those being educated – a difference arising from the fact that 'conventional' ways of reading these texts are legitimated by the assumption that every reader will react to them in precisely the same way and that 'the lads in question are as impervious as they themselves are to the magnetism of the books they bid them study and digest'. In fact, some of their young charges are anything but 'impervious' to the 'magnetism' of the works, and cannot help but find it 'personally and intensely interesting'. For these, 'Greek love was for Plato, no "figure of speech", but a present, poignant reality' precisely because 'Greek love is for modern students of Plato no "figure of speech" and no anachronism, but a present poignant reality' (*Memoirs*, 102).

Symonds's reading of Plato was avocational – despite what he says in the letter to Jowett, the texts were not part of Harrow's curriculum. Yet, this letter offers a potent critique of curricula that police how the past is to be approached by carefully

controlling the ways in which its remains are to be read: a curriculum that tacitly

reconciles its veneration of Plato with the contemporary mores he actually transgresses.

In pointing out that Plato expresses for many readers desires they, in the present, also

feel, Symonds exposes what Jowett's socially legitimate reading elides: not only that

interpretations of the past always involve the sanctification of certain ideas about the

present, but that there are as many ideas of the present as there are readers and,

consequently, as many ideas of the past as there are readers to read its extant remains.

The present, as much as the past, becomes a matter of how its denizens react to books –

and of the strategies employed by 'educators' in ensuring that textual interpretations

remain rigidly conventional.

In the introduction to *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (1982), the modern antiquary S.A.J.

Bradley sets out precisely the point of view that Symonds's letter works against:

[T]he surviving poetry of the Anglo-Saxons, along with their prose […]

constitutes a legacy yet more precious for its antiquity. The poems are voices

carrying over moral values, thought and sentiment from a period of English

history[...][261]

Obviously, it would be foolish to argue that antiquaries (including James) would be

mistaken in attending to the texts of the past as useful historical documents – as

material for scholarly as well as literary perusal, to use Falkner's terms. Symonds's

letter combats, however, the assumption that 'moral values, thoughts and sentiments'

can be 'carried over' directly from the past to the present merely by reading: he rejects

the idea that readers in the present will be able to grasp them without the inevitable

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[261] S.A.J. Bradley, 'Introduction' to *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: J.M. Dent, 1982), pp. xi-xxii (xii).

mediation of the 'moral values, thought and sentiment' that constitute the reader's own situation within the complex networks of socio-political conditions that make up the present. The reality of Greek life for Symonds is fundamentally different from the reality of Greek life for 'educators' – precisely because their expectations and experiences of life in the present are also different.[262]

Similar concerns about education as the perpetuation of a particular kind of status quo permeate Forster's *The Longest Journey* (1907). Following the progress of Rickie, a young student at Cambridge, the novel's first line sets the tone with a cryptic assertion by Rickie's friend Ansell, who announces: 'the cow is there'.[263] Ansell is speaking at a gathering of undergraduates in Rickie's rooms, where they discuss a philosophical dilemma: do objects 'exist only when there is someone to look at them?' For the purposes of the discussion, 'seeing' is not a question of 'objectivity and subjectivity'. Instead, the processes that govern the identity, nature and ontological status of both sentient and inanimate objects becomes a matter of what definitely is, or definitely is not, 'there' for the individual self. For Ansell, the fact that he has proved the cow's existence for himself is quite enough: '"She's there for me," he declared. "I don't care whether she's there for you or not. Whether I'm in Cambridge or Iceland or dead, the cow will be there"' (*The Longest Journey*, 7). Rickie, on the other hand, has not only failed to come to any conclusion in the matter, but worries that he 'had missed the whole point, and was overlaying philosophy with gross and senseless details' (*The*

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[262] In this sense, Symonds foreshadows Will Kostenbaum's idea of a 'gay reading' that not only emphasises, but also creates, for the reader, the particularity of his otherness. It postulates a reader who reads 'resistantly for inscriptions of his condition, […] an urge strong enough that it […] defines him and his kind as a separate world'. Such a reading reveals identity as something 'constructed through reading', but which, 'once it has been located on the page, […] glows like an essence that already existed *before* a reader's glance brought it to life'. See Wayne Kostenbaum, 'Wilde's Hard Labour and the Birth of Gay Reading' in *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (New York and London: Routlegde, 1990), pp. 176-89 (176-77); emphasis in original.
[263] E.M. Forster, *The Longest Journey* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 7. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Longest Journey, 9). To a large extent, the novel is the story of how he grapples with the problem of whether 'the cow is there'.

Like Ansell, Symonds seems to have grasped an intuitive understanding of the problem posed by the cow, which Rickie finds so problematic. Like that bovine creature, homoerotic attraction is 'there' for Symonds, because he has proved it for himself. This reading of Plato is not a revelation of Symonds's own proclivities, of which he had always been aware, but of the deceptive fetters put in place by the educators who teach the classics with an eye to legitimating their own socio-political agenda. Against this, his reading experience portends the subversion of any interpretative system that denies the legitimacy of his own personal identification with the text, because it emphasises how intensely subjective the mediation of textual meaning – and with it, the interpretation of extinct cultures of which they are the trace – can be: 'My mental and moral evolution proceeded now upon a path which had no contact with the prescribed systems of education. […] Masters and schools and methods of acquiring knowledge lay outside me, to be used or neglected as I judged best' (*Memoirs*, 107). Symonds differs from Bast in his study of 'higher culture' because, unlike that clerk, he is able to make the connection for himself between his own life and others who 'lived in that way, aspired in that way'. In doing so, however, he also exposes the mechanisms of antiquarian reading as grounded in a study that, although designed to communicate verifiable facts about the culture of which it speaks, actually succeeds in policing the kind of 'life' to which one might legitimately 'aspire' in the present (*Memoirs*, 100).

Symonds's letter makes implicitly the point that Adam Stout's study of the history of archaeology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries makes explicitly when he complains about the 'epistemic benchmark' established by inter-war

archaeologists whose outlook was '[h]ighly reductionist, (literally) materialist, hostile to speculation and suspicious of theory'.[264] Stout's problem with archaeological interpretation is akin to Symonds's objection to the educational establishment's official stance on Plato: it denies the otherness of the past, making it comply with those power structures that still regulate experience in the *present*. Stout draws on Joan Hegardt's argument that the elision of the past's intrinsic 'otherness' implicitly politicises the way in which the past is studied:

> Every time we get a brief glimpse of the Other we look away because we know that the presence of the Other will problematize our self-sufficient understanding of history. We want archaeology to be 'Our Archaeology'; an archaeology that must not be disturbed by the presence of a metaphysical Other.[265]

Hergardt's point again recalls Symonds's argument that late-Victorian educators are unable to countenance, in Plato, a continuity between the past of which they read and the experience of sexuality in the present precisely because they are unable to conceive of the 'ideal' civilization as being so profoundly 'other', in this respect, from their own.

Symonds's reading exposes and rejects this approach to the past by bringing his experiences of homoerotic attraction in the present to bear upon Greek texts, producing a reading of Greek culture that validates his own experiences. In doing so, however, he also validates those experiences in the face of his own uncongenial socio-political climate. In offering his own experiences as evidence for a Greek past whose

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[264] Adam Stout, *Creating Prehistory: Druids, Ley Hunters and Archaeologists in Pre-war Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 241.
[265] Joan Hegardt, quoted in Stout, p. 243.

relationship to present-day ideals is more complex than the curriculum is prepared to allow, Symonds's exposition of the rich complexity of the relationship between past and present – neither of which truly mirrors the other – also reveals the 'rich complexity' of 'cultural meanings' *within* the present; a complexity which the educators' official reading had denied. Ultimately, his argument resembles Stout's conclusion:

> 'The ethical task of archaeology is thus *to bear witness to the past other'*, says [Julian] Thomas. To which I would only add that we can best do this by honouring the 'present other'. We could be encouraging new ideas about antiquity, from whatever quarter and however outrageous. Accepting that the past is fluid, we need to be as inventive with it as we need to be with the future.[266]

To argue a connection between Stout's radical conclusion and James's cautious suggestion that established taxonomies might not be entirely above criticism is itself something of an imaginative leap: yet Stout's and James's conclusions are underscored by the same essential concerns. As Matthew Johnson notes, the study of the past often resembles – indeed, often involves – the study of texts, with the result that the past is always inescapably approached from the vantage point of a present in which it is 'read'.[267] If James's scholarly writings eschew such a radical epistemology, then his tales at least remind us that the search for meaning in past material cultures relies on the recognition of the past as an open-ended text. Indeed, the use of the book (manifestly a textual object) as a symbol for the way in which antiquarian objects demand to be read

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[266] Stout, p. 246; Stout's emphasis.
[267] Matthew Johnson, pp. 12-16.

in the present metonomises Johnson's idea. In James's stories, one might say, supernatural phenomena surrounding books emphasise the idea that the meaning, even of historical texts, is itself phenomenological. Their preoccupation with the reconstruction of the material history of books thus provides a parallel to concerns about the reconstruction of textual meaning by readers in the present that underscores Symonds's overtly political concerns. Written at a time when the study of the material culture of the past was palpably in a state of flux, the cultural work of the antiquary-reader in James's tales facilitates a fascinating connection between early-twentieth-century ideas of the book and ideas of the past as a 'readable' narrative. As I will argue, their insistence on the literariness of the historical artefact-as-text allows us to consider late-Victorian and Edwardian ideas about the study of the past as symptomatic of a wider epistemological crisis that, in Forster's and James's texts, books come to symbolise.

iv. Resurrecting the past: the cultural work of antiquarianism

The impulse of James's protagonists to catalogue rather than imaginatively engage with antiquarian artefacts recalls an accusation levelled at the London Society of Antiquaries in the eighteenth century. In 1770, the Society's journal, *Archaeologia*, began publication, its stated aim being to restore antiquarianism's academic credibility by 'explod[ing] the vanity of inventors and propagators of fantasies'.[268] The journal was thus calculated to combat a long-standing stereotype that portrayed antiquarianism as nothing more than the fetishisation of objects on the basis of their great age. In John Earle's *Micro-Cosmographie* (1628), for example, the antiquary is characterised as one 'that hath that unnaturall disease to bee enamour'd of […] all things (as Dutchmen doe

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[268] Quoted in Glyn Daniel, *A Short History of Archaeology* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 46.

Cheese) the better for being mouldy and worme-eaten'.[269] For the antiquary, Earle

implies, the interest lies neither in the object's historical significance nor even,

necessarily, in its financial value. Rather, 'a Saint's Well', 'a ruin'd Abbey', 'a Crosse

or a stone footstoole'[270] are prized for their ability to make the past available as a

commodity – to allow the antiquary, as Brain M. Fagan puts it, to 'possess the past, to

keep a piece of antiquity on the mantel'.[271]

Archaeologia combated this concept of the antiquary as a glorified historical

magpie who snatched indiscriminately at antiquated relics in order to preserve them

under glass. Instead, it sought to make its objects of study the basis of wider historical

enquiry by restoring the objects accurately into their proper historical contexts. For

Horace Walpole, however, this was to miss the point about the deficiencies of the

antiquary's approach. Perusing the second issue of Archaeologia, he was moved to

complain that

> The antiquaries will be as ridiculous as they used to be; and since it is
>
> impossible to infuse taste in them, they will be dry and dull as their
>
> predecessors. One may revive what is perished, but it will perish again, if more
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> life is not breathed into it than it enjoyed originally.[272]

Walpole makes the same complaint about antiquarianism as Matthew Johnson would

make about archaeology two-and-a-half-centuries later, urging the need to acknowledge

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[269] Quoted in Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London and N.Y.: Hambledon and London, 2004), p. xiii. I am concerned here with the popular stereotype of the eighteenth-century antiquary which, despite Sweet's rigorous defence of antiquaries' real achievements in the furthering of knowledge about the past, was less than flattering.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Brian M. Fagan, *In the Beginning: An Introduction to Archaeology*, 6th ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foreseman and Co., 1988), p. 14.
[272] Quoted in Daniel, *Short History*, p. 47

that the study of historical artefacts involves, at least partly, an act of creation on the part of the observer, whose study brings 'more life' to the object that it may even have 'enjoyed originally'. Both argue that a scholarly determination of historical provenance is useless without a literary apprehension of its continued, even personal, relevance – that to study objectively is not, fully and comprehensibly, to 'read' the object as text. Walpole's attack came less than a decade after he himself had placed just such an impulse towards the imaginative reconstruction of antiquarian objects at the heart of the gothic genre, with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Passing its first edition off as a newly discovered Italian manuscript, the novel's tale of ghostly knights and the nefarious doings of the medieval aristocracy seems, as James's tales do, to put into practice the kind of imaginative engagement with antiquarian texts that he himself would advocate. Rather than presenting the work as simply a scholarly edition, he presents the manuscript as a story that breathes 'new life' into the text (and its historical context) in the form of a tale that can still raise a pleasing terror.

Like Walpole, James's own approach to the text as historical artefact emphasises its status as still appropriate for literary perusal, a necessary adjunct to the rigorous scholarly appraisal of the object, which is nevertheless not entirely dispensed with. Introducing his edition of 'Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories' (1922), for instance, James writes that they came to his attention through an entry in a recent catalogue which, he notes, immediately excited his curiosity. Taking 'an early opportunity of transcribing' the stories, James is pleased to note that he 'did not find them disappointing'.[273] There proceeds a formal description of the manuscript and some hypotheses regarding the provenance of the tales themselves, but these scholarly details are mere adjuncts to James's wish to *read* the stories and to print them in order that

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[273] M.R. James, 'Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories' in *The Haunted Dolls' House and Other Stories: The Complete Ghost Stories of M.R. James, Volume 2*, ed. S.T. Joshi (NY: Penguin, 2006).

they may be read by others – precisely the opposite of the acquisitive impulse displayed by his fictional protagonists. The nature of the disappointment he doesn't experience in reading the tales is ambiguous and is just as likely to stem from his literary perusal of the stories as from the scholar's pleasure at the survival of the object itself.

The same melding of the literary and the scholarly is on display in James's introduction to the anthology *Ghosts & Marvels* (1924, edited by V.H. Collins). James presents himself as a scholar of the ghost story, providing details of the numerous editions of Sheridan LeFanu's 'Schalken the Painter' (1839). Indeed, James himself numbers among his many publications an edition of rare stories by LeFanu, which he edited as *Madam Crowl's Ghost* (1923). In short, James himself avoids the staunch separation of literary and scholarly approaches to books, taking a scholarly approach to the history of the ghost story in order to further its enjoyment as literature. He does not adhere to his own protagonists' tendency to view modern genre fiction as automatically excluded from the methodological rigour of the scholarly gaze. In James, the 'literary' invades the scholarly at every turn, and woe betide those scholars who view it as the trivial, imaginative counterpart to the objectifying facticity of the scholar's vocation.

A lecture delivered at Oxford University by Montagu Burrows in 1884 makes this distinction between the scholarly cataloguer and the imaginative 'literary' interpreter even more explicit. Comparing the relative merits of the disciplines of antiquarianism and history, Burrows cited the antiquary's penchant for 'naked, unadorned facts' as a grievous defect.[274] Against this he formulates an idea of the historian as the antiquary's opposite. The historian, he argues, 'strongly prefers what may be called the literary aspect of the subject': he 'revels in the inquisitive search for motives, the comparisons suggested, the arts of illustration, the adjuncts of effect, the

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[274] Montagu Burrows, *Antiquarianism and History: A Lecture* (Oxford: Parker & Co., 1885), p. 7.

balance of composition, the faculty of catching the stray lights which glance over the landscape'.[275] Antiquarians, in short, simply gather raw materials, which require the imaginative intervention of a historian to weave a story out of them and give them meaning.

In the light of such commentary, it might be tempting to view James's tales as the work of an antiquary who recognised the need to reconcile the contrasting impulses of history and antiquarianism. This is to ignore, however, the wider implications of such a recognition in the context of the changing status of antiquarianism. At the turn of the twentieth century, the ways in which the material cultures of the past were studied in the present were the subject of ongoing methodological debates. Focus upon the relative merits of object-focused antiquarianism and the narrative tendencies of history began to seem inadequate as the discovery of prehistory necessitated the transformation of traditional antiquarianism into new disciplines designed to take into account the vast expanse of geological time. Early antiquarians had a working idea of prehistory, whose limitations are exemplified by the widespread acceptance of the Anglican Archbishop of Armagh's pronouncement, in 1654, that the Earth's creation could be categorically dated to 4004 BC, a date inserted into the marginalia of the Authorised Version and quickly established as tantamount to a doctrinal tenet as sacred as the word of the Bible itself.[276] Glyn Daniel emphasises just how radical the propositions of uniformitarian geologists regarding the Earth's immense antiquity must have been, by pointing out that

> the striking and oft-quoted phrase 'a rose-red city, half as old as time' which
> John William Burgon wrote in 1845, was not […] a flight of poetic fancy. To

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[275] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[276] See Glyn Daniel, *The Idea of Prehistory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 18.

Burgon and to many early Victorians time *was* only six thousand years old, and he literally meant Petra to be half that time in age.[277]

The opening words of Percy Lubbock's best-selling *Prehistoric Times* illustrates how drastically the situation had changed by 1865: 'The first appearance of man in Europe dates from a period so remote that neither history nor tradition can throw any light on his origin or mode of life.'[278] Early antiquaries had been accustomed to the idea that written records could not shed light on the whole of human history, but the totality of that literally unwritten history now appeared increasingly beyond measure.

Lubbock argued that '[a]rchaeology forms the link between geology and history'.[279] Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, the emergent disciplines of archaeology and anthropology began to supplement the findings of history in ways that fundamentally modified the antiquary's task, shifting the focus of debate from the materials themselves (the domain of the fetishistic antiquary) to the kinds of methods available for processing those materials in the present (the historian's narrative impulse and the archaeologist's obsession with classificatory systems). This shift implies a new recognition that the process of making the past meaningful in the present depended on the way one 'read' the objects under consideration. Antiquarianism was itself becoming antique as hermeneutic practices took precedence over the collection and display of objects.

If James's decision to describe his stories as those of an 'antiquary' can be seen as an attempt to signpost the tales as performing a particular kind of cultural work within a methodological debate, however, it should be noted that the debate was still

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[277] Ibid. p. 51.
[278] Quoted in Daniel, p. 51.
[279] Ibid. p. 57.

very much ongoing and the distinction between antiquarianism and archaeology was far from clear at the time James's stories were being written. In 1891, for example, the historian Thomas Hodgkin reiterates the stance already taken by Burrows in his earlier lecture. Significantly, however, Hodgkin assigns to archaeology the role Burrows had assigned to antiquarianism only seven years before: 'the Archaeologist *collects* facts relating to the past and the Historian *arranges* them'.[280] The congruence of Burrows's account of antiquarianism with Hodgkin's of archaeology illustrates how deceptive clear distinctions between the two can be when retrospectively imposed. Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn's definition of archaeology as a discipline which approaches the material remnants of the past with a view to 'understand[ing] what these things mean for the human story', for example, might imply that archaeology moved beyond the antiquary's obsession with the fetishisation of decontextualised relics, finally bringing the historian's 'literary' impulse to bear upon the non-literary objects of prehistory.[281] Yet Michael Johnson makes, in 2010, essentially the same complaint about archaeology as Walpole had about antiquarianism two hundred years earlier when he chastises the lack of a 'literary' apprehension on the part of its practitioners. Clearly, despite the one having apparently superseded the other, archaeology and antiquarianism have more in common with each other than either has in common with the 'literary' dispositions of history.

James's antiquaries reflect this overlap between the archaeologist and the antiquary. On the face of it, Dennistoun of 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' is no archaeologist – his varied interests, encompassing medieval history, architecture and

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[280] Quoted in Stout, p. 15; emphasis in original.
[281] Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods, Practice* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 9.

textual scholarship, mean that he more closely resembles the antiquarian polymath

described by Phillippa Levine:

> Few antiquaries before the advent of a specifically archaeological method would
> have seen any need to treat exhumed burial remains differently than a town
> charter or a church font. They were as comfortable editing medieval poetry as
> they were inspecting Roman remains.[282]

As Levine implies, the conflation of text and object in the reconstruction of the past

only acquired an ethos of transgressive promiscuity when the gradual canonisation of

archaeology and history as professional academic disciplines had the effect of

ostracising antiquarianism from the professional sphere and led to the study of the past

becoming taxonomised as *either* textual or material: antiquarian or archaeological but

never both at once. Despite this, no better description could be found for the

deficiencies of Dennistoun's reductive approach to the physical traces contained in the

Canon's scrapbook than Stout's description of mid-century archaeologists. As with

Dennistoun, the narrow 'epistemic bench-mark', which these archaeologists employed,

led to a view of the past that was, in part, merely the product of the pre-determined 'set

of technical skills and techniques' brought to bear upon it. Placing his faith

complacently in established taxonomies, Dennistoun subjects the scrapbook-fragments

to an analysis that merely places them within an already extant palaeographic

framework, thereby wholly missing the horrific significance at least one of those

fragments retains. Moreover, the failure properly to 'read' the object as a still-resonant

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[282] Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838-1886* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 71.

imaginative text means that Dennistoun shares the archaeologist's damaging 'fixation with material culture' at the expense of the object as 'literary' text.[283]

Rather than debating the relative merits either of archaeology or antiquarianism as means of assessing material and textual remains, however, James's tales criticise the *a priori* taxonomisation of reading practices that goes hand in hand with the taxonomy that professionalisation enacts. The tales do not call attention to the deficiencies of any one established methodological approach. Rather, they criticise the rigid demarcations that disciplinary professionalisation instigates in the reading of texts – the pre-conceptions it legitimates in order to prescribe the 'reading' in advance.

It is in this respect Leonard Bast's deficiencies as a reader not only connect him with James's antiquary-protagonists but with a wider debate concerning the epistemological baggage that plagued the late-Victorian and Edwardian antiquary. A wide social gulf separates James's academics from Forster's clerk, yet they resemble each other in their susceptibility to what Shane McCorristine identifies as the 'ludic terrorism' that results from the disturbing blur between avocational and vocational study.[284] As Levine observes, even when antiquarian investigations were pursued outside of the antiquary's nominal profession, the 'determination and single mindedness with which these men pursued the interests of their leisure hours' was astonishing: an intense, auto-didactic urge that allowed the antiquary to define himself by consuming certain texts in a certain way. To illustrate the point, Levine quotes from mid-nineteenth-century antiquary William Baker:

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[283] Stout, p. 6.

[284] Shane McCorristine, 'Academia, Avocation and Ludicity in the Supernatural Fiction of M.R. James', *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, Volume 13, 2007, 54-65.

I get up before five o'clock, and read Ancient History till six, my time to go to

work; at breakfast time I read the Spectator for a quarter of an hour; after dinner

I have three-quarters of an hour, which I employ in reading Blair's Lectures;

after work I read Ancient History from eight till nine o'clock; from nine till

half-past ten or eleven, I study Euclid, and on Sundays before and after dinner, I

practice drawing.[285]

McCorristine defines the 'ludic' as 'an intrinsically motivated phenomenon engaged in

by individuals or groups of individuals for its own sake, that is, regardless of any

utilitarian or profiting purpose'.[286] Baker's and Bast's attempts at autodidacticism

resemble the academics of James's tales in their determination to banish the ludic

impulse from reading undertaken with a 'utilitarian or profiting purpose'. For

McCorristine, there is a relationship 'between avocation and the ludic impulse inherent

in debates revolving around the transvaluation of work',[287] which emerges through

> that special dissonance in James's ghost stories created by the clash of the *a*
>
> *priori* vocationalism of the academic figure with the rapturous imposition of the
>
> terrorist ludicity of the ghost, resulting in a shocking realisation of the
>
> avocational nature of these scholarly activities.[288]

McCorristine's suggestion is that the academic protagonists of James's tales suppress

the ludicity of their scholarly work precisely in order to bring their activities into the

arena of 'the scholarly', and to bring the scholarly into the arena of a viable profession

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[285] Quoted in Levine, p. 17.
[286] McCorristine, p. 54.
[287] Ibid. p. 58.
[288] Ibid. p. 60.

or vocation: a demarcation that automatically rejects the labelling of other kinds of reading as either scholarly or professional.[289] It is an act of disciplinary containment, designed to ensure that their research has a point beyond the mere killing of time:

> James's tales […] seem to suggest that the integration of work with play and a repression of the awareness of the ludicity of scholarly work, of the avocational nature of the knowledge industry, produces the ambient basis for the supernatural situation.[290]

Bast's reading of Ruskin shares with Dennistoun's reading of the scrapbook and Anderson's reading of the town archives a determination to deny the exercise of any ludic impulse – any attempt to *enjoy* the writings on the basis of what they still have to offer 'in themselves' to the individual reader. According to McCorristine, the presence of such an impulse frees the exercise from the need to satisfy the overdetermined vocational criteria of either the autodidact's search for 'culture' or the antiquary's search for 'naked, unadorned' facts. In the absence of 'ludicity', Leonard's industrious studies simply imprison him within that 'daily grey' with which, as the object of a determinedly vocational reading experience, his canonical texts imbricate.

McCorristine's reference to the 'knowledge industry' is telling, therefore, because it relates so closely to James's point in *Wanderings*: namely, that not only the methodological process but also the knowledge thus unearthed is the result of industry

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[289] Penny Fielding's argument that James's tales exhibit an anxiety about the 'library's metonymic position as a signifier of "culture," at a time when that very word was a contested issue' coheres with McCorristine's. She suggests, for instance, that James reflects contemporary concerns about the rise of the public library as a disturbing alternative to the scholarly library, in which 'a whole nest of alarming serpents has invaded the library space', so that the 'ideal library is always haunted by its more subversive and socialized doppelgänger'. See Penny Fielding, 'Reading Rooms: M.R. James and the Library of Modernity', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Fall 2000), 749-71 (752, 755, 756).

[290] McCorristine, p. 60.

on the reader's part. Industry, blindly vocational or programmatic, will simply breed familiarity with the materiality of manuscripts or the 'outside' of books; the reader will know them only as 'husks' of a culture already determined by someone else. In this sense, he joins Symonds in his implication that new knowledge depends on being aware of the kind of industry that is being applied: there are many ways of reading a text beyond the institutionally legitimate.

v. 'Honouring the present other'

It is important to note that pre-archaeological antiquaries were awake to the interpretative challenges posed by prehistory's material relics, recognising their important status as clues to a silent tract of 'eternity' beyond the written record. The difference between the antiquarian and archaeological ideas of prehistory before the development of archaeological approaches was simply that, with only the Biblical record to fall back on, 'eternity' was conceived as being only six thousand years long. Daniel cites the seventeenth-century antiquarianism's obsession with Druidism as a symptom of another widespread problem amongst pre-archaeological antiquarianism:

> Everything had to belong to something and to something clearly named and historical. One could not confess failure with the early past of man. It had to be peopled by someone [and] […] they had to be named people to whom one could turn confidently. Here was no time for the innominate uncertainties of modern prehistory.[291]

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[291] Daniel, *Idea of Prehistory*, p. 23.

As 'modern prehistory' developed and the sheer immensity of unrecorded time became apparent, the 'innominate uncertainties' became more and more a cause of ontological anxiety. In this respect, Lubbock's choice of words in the title of *Prehistoric Times* is very telling. According to Daniel, the book did much to popularise the term 'prehistory', even though other terms, including 'antehistory' had been suggested: Lubbock 'wisely decided against this word, and, although it was of course spelt with an *e* and not an *i*, it is fortunate that the name was dropped'.[292]

In archaeological terms, Lubbock's decision might well have been a wise one, but the unsettling idea of pre-history as 'anti-history' is useful in understanding some of the imaginative effects of its immensity upon the literary imagination of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors. As Mark Twain pointed out in 1903, the exponential extension of history enlightened to the precise degree that it unsettled:

> Man has been here 32,000 years. That it took a hundred million years to prepare the world for him is proof that that is what it was done for. I suppose it is, I dunno. If the Eiffel Tower were now representing the world's age, the skin of paint on the pinnacle-nob at its summit would represent man's share of that age; and anybody would perceive that that skin was what the tower was built for. I reckon they would. I dunno.[293]

Twain's ironic formulation presents prehistory not only as a lacuna at the very origin of the human history, but as an abyss over which mankind is precariously perched, as at the apex of a narrowing tower. As Gillian Beer has written: 'no historical period

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[292] Ibid. p. 10.
[293] Quoted in Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), pp. 25-26.

consists only of its present. Evidence of this is provided […] by past writing when read within and read into the present'.[294] The same is true of archaeological remains which, when 'read' often serve only to reveal their irretrievably alien nature: the total absence of a context in which these can be made intelligible. For Beer, 'the study of past writing and past reading can disturb any autocratic emphasis on the self and the present, as if they were stable entities'. The way the period's literature represents communication with the 'other', as the means by which the present's sudden plunge into silence, incoherence or illiteracy is precipitated, demonstrates the profound anxiety aroused by the elision of the written record – and by geological time as an abyss into which that record disappeared, rendering meaning dependent on a teleology whose endpoint was so vastly distant as to be unknowable.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), with its paranoid insistence on 'civilized' man's proximity to 'the night of first ages', is an example (*Heart of Darkness*, 63). The narrator, Marlow comments on the way in which the sound of native African drumming, divorced from any familiar frame of reference, is rendered meaningless to the Westerners who hear it even though, for those doing the drumming, the noise contains 'as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country' (*Heart of Darkness*, 39). What is at stake in Marlow's comparison (savage drums vs 'Christian bells') is the implied levelling of the cultures thus compared. For Marlow's ears, not only is the meaning of the drumming not immediately comprehensible, so is the culture that produced it as potentially unknowable and other as the Christian society that *makes* itself known by means of bell-ringing and other signifying rituals, sounds, languages and customs. Both cultures depend, for their significance, upon their being recognised, understood, reciprocated. It is little wonder that, for Marlow, conversation

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[294] Gillian Beer, *Arguing With the Past* (London and NY: Routledge, 1989), p. 3.

is deemed valuable insofar as it offers 'a sense of real presence'. Without anyone to recognise the communication, meaning disappears (*Heart of Darkness*, 79). Such reciprocation is impossible, within the meaningless void of the jungle, for Marlow and the other ivory hunters, who find themselves 'cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings' (*Heart of Darkness*, 63). To the natives, the invaders' systems of signification are similarly alien – to them, white, 'civilized' man is the 'other'. The same/other dichotomy that justifies the invaders' presence as a civilising influence is thus inverted.

As a symbol of the mutual otherness of 'civilised' and 'savage', the silence of the wilderness, like the communicative blank spot contained within the drumming, not only poses a challenge to the savage/civilised dichotomy, but also reveals the potential 'otherness' latent in all communication. If the wilderness contains 'truth stripped of its cloak of time', then the nature of this 'truth' is, like the signification of the natives' drums, ultimately characterised by an absence. This is the paradoxical 'meaning' that Marlow cites when he hears the whoops and shouts that emanate from the human inhabitants of the riverbanks: 'a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend' (*Heart of Darkness*, 63). For Marlow, the silence itself has an agency, in that it communicates not just 'nothing', but 'nothingness': a blank, all-encompassing 'darkness' always already at the heart of all signifying systems, that threatens not only the specific civilization which has given rise to Marlow's expedition, but the very concept of civilization as an improving or progressive force. As Marlow notes at the beginning of his tale, the shore of the Thames was once also a place of darkness, equally appalling for the Roman invaders. Such a comparison places the intersection of the known and the unknown at the precise point that prehistory gives way to history with the arrival on British shores

of literate Roman forces. Yet this distinction implies not only that civilisation rests on the silencing of Celtic others, but also that 'civilizing' forces overwrite, but never destroy, the vast silence which, in the absence of extant written sources, inevitably predates them.

As Beer argues and the Conradian text exemplifies, the appearance of prehistory destabilised late-Victorian faith not only in the evolutionary scheme of things, but also in the socio-political certainties of Western 'civilization'. In *Howards End*, for instance, the socio-political certainties of the society to which the Wilcoxes belong and to which the Basts aspire rests on very shaky foundations: 'I felt for a moment that the whole Wilcox family was a fraud, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness' (*Howards End*, 40-41). Helen Schlegel echoes Marlow here, in her diagnosis of a capitalist society obsessed with an outer life of displayable symbols. The Wilcoxes have plenty of 'coin' yet they, like Bast, harbour a preoccupation with the outer life: the outward expression of gentility, and the 'outside' of everything, including books. 'Personal relations', it would appear, extend to the relationship not only between people, but between readers and books. Hence Leonard's difficulty in forming a 'personal relation' with culture – the very kind of relationship whose formation was so revelatory for Symonds. Leonard, whose fear of falling into an 'abyss' where nothing 'counted' (*Howards End*, 58) might be based on a horror of poverty, but it also resembles Paul Wilcox's 'panic and emptiness', a fear of the lacuna that lies behind the outward expressions of what, in capitalist society, constitutes social status.

Thus, in *Howards End*, the abyss constitutes an epistemological gap at the heart of characters' experiences, threatening an ultimate loss of meaning by reminding them of the contingencies of their own socialised existence. In fact, the novel bestows on the

'abyss' the troubling cultural currency retained by prehistory in the period, as the harbinger of a pervasive 'otherness' as potentially disruptive as James's spectres. When Helen brings the Basts to Charles Wilcox's wedding, for example, Jacky is a literal beggar at the feast, a disturbing influence not because of her actions but because of her very presence: 'there was no malice in Jacky. There she sat, a piece of cake in one hand, an empty champagne glass in the other, doing no harm to anybody' (*Howards End*, 229). She resembles the spectre that taunts Parkins at the end of James's 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You'. Like Margaret, who cannot bring herself to shake hands with Jacky, the professor 'could not have borne – he didn't know why – to touch it' (*Count Magnus*, 99). Yet this horror of physical contact is unaccountable – as with Jacky, 'it is not so evident what more the creature that came in answer to the whistle could have done than frighten' (*Count Magnus*, 100). In fact, Jacky's presence, like the spectre's, is disruptive because it mixes two realms (one of social, the other of ontological status) the protagonists would prefer to have kept separate, threatening to render protagonists' 'views on certain points […] less clear cut than they used to be' (*Count Magnus*, 100).[295]

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[295] As both Fielding and McCorristine indicate, James's tales display an anxiety regarding the unstable taxonomisation of knowledge and the spaces of knowledge. In a comprehensive analysis of James's stories, Simon MacCulloch expands this anxiety about taxonomies, bringing the tales implicitly into the arena of the kind of 'ontological dread' that governs Conrad's work: they pit 'a brittle civilisation based on rationalism and distinctive human value' against 'barbarous antagonists who represent [the] chaos, irrationality, and inhumanity that an unreserved [i.e. a general, untaxonomised] embrace of the inhuman cosmos produces'. In their use of the supernatural to bring about the 'satisfyingly noisy' collapse of the 'detailed piece of architecture' that is human knowledge, they embody the beginnings of a tradition of 'weird fiction' that reaches its apotheosis with H.P. Lovecraft. See Simon MacCulloch, 'The Toad in the Study: M.R James, H.P. Lovecraft, and Forbidden Knowledge' in *Warnings to the Curious: A Sheaf of Criticism on M.R. James*, ed. S.T. Joshi and Rosemary Pardoe (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2007), pp. 76-112 (78). W.H. Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* (1908), for example, is a typical 'weird' text of the kind MacCulloch has in mind. Hodgson's novel seems to emulate James's use of textuality as a vehicle for horror – but, with its trope of a madman's manuscript literally perched upon the top of an abyss into which his house disappears and from which strange and terrible creatures emerge, it also echoes Conrad's and Twain's unease about the status of history-as-text: the thin skin 'overwriting' the forces of a vast unknowable prehistory which threatens inevitably to recur.

Likening Bast's precarious position on the edge of the middle classes to his being precariously balanced on the edge of an abyss, the narrator comments that his story is 'not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet' (*Howards End*, 58). Of course, in so ostentatiously drawing attention to its exclusion of the 'very poor' from the narrative, the text *is* concerned with the very poor to the extent that it comments on their consignment, by society and its chroniclers, to an obscure abyss – an action that is repeatedly enacted by the novel's characters, who are determined to ensure that the denizens of the abyss remain at arm's length, part of a different world. It draws attention to the characters' constant elision of the otherness that threatens the stability of their own socio-political situation. Earlier, for example, Mrs Munt encounters a member of the 'lower orders' when Charles Wilcox, driving her to Howards End, stops at a garage:

> 'Esprit de classe' – if one may coin the phrase – was strong in Mrs. Munt. She sat quivering while a member of the lower orders deposited a metal funnel, a saucepan, and a garden squirt beside the roll of oilcloth.
>
>   'Right behind?'
>
>   'Yes, sir.' And the lower orders vanished in a cloud of dust. (*Howards End*, 34)

What is ironically characterised by the narrator, in his description of abject poverty, as an abyss into which the very poor disappear, is literally enacted here. Mrs Munt's 'quivering' fear of the garage staff arises from an 'esprit de classe' that taxonomises social strata, setting up the 'lower orders' as creatures from a realm beyond her own –

the inhabitants of an abyssal lacuna, the 'otherness' of whose denizens her taxonomic operation maintains as such. The lower orders vanish 'in a cloud of dust' only because of the speed with which the higher orders flee. What such episodes acknowledge is that 'panic and emptiness' is not only a by-product of the capitalist system, but also a very necessary way of maintaining it, since it allows those within it to castigate anything outside themselves as terrifyingly other.

Whilst acknowledging that her moneyed position is, paradoxically, what allows her the privilege of doing so, Margaret Schlegel posits a faith in 'personal relationships' as a way of overcoming this ontological panic by sidestepping apparently 'given' social divisions in favour of a negotiation between a society of individuals. The 'prose' and the 'passion' have their collorary in Margaret and Helen's debate regarding the 'outer' and the 'inner' life: the Schlegels champion the latter, with the Wilcoxes championing the former. The problem, for Leonard as for the Wilcoxes, is an overabundance of the prosaic 'outer life', in which gentility is all-important, but in which gentility is also a product of a correctly expressed 'assertion' – of props. The text acknowledges the arbitrary nature of the capitalist system – the emptiness that lies behind it – but eschews the panic felt by Paul at its dissolution. In establishing the infinite variety of 'personal relations' in its stead, the text not only embraces the otherness that capitalism makes monstrous, but embraces the very inevitability of each individual's *a priori* otherness from each other. Acknowledging civilisation as always underscored by a *tabula rasa* on which new 'connections' are possible, the text champions 'personal relationships', including, here as in 'The Celestial Omnibus', a personal relationship with texts – the very kind of relationship whose formation was so revelatory for Symonds.[296]

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[296] For the predominance of 'personal relationships' as a replacement for theology in Edwardian thought, see Jonathan Rose, *The Edwardian Temperament 1895-1919* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1986), Chapter 2.

With Beer, therefore, Symonds underlines the point that implicitly connects the reading of ancient artefacts in James and the reading of present text in Forster, suggesting that to 'read' any text is always to be drawn into confrontation with the other, and thus to realise the potential otherness of one's own subject position:

> The outsider's eye, across space or time, makes observations which do not simply supplement but may transform the questions to be asked. We are those outsiders; but then so also are the books we study.[297]

In this way, Symonds draws attention to the same potential distance between present-day reader and ancient artefact which prehistory, with its decontextualisation of antiquarian objects, had accentuated. One sees – but only ever 'for oneself'.[298] It is significant, therefore, that the one point at which Leonard comes closest to finding himself on an equal footing with the Schlegels (his nocturnal ramble into Wimbledon) is directly associated with prehistory as a liberating wiping of the ontological slate: 'He had visited the county of Surrey when darkness covered its amenities, and its cosy villas had re-entered ancient night' (*Howards End*, 127). Looking squarely into a blank, empty void in which no significance obtains save for that which onlookers are able to assert for themselves, Leonard is *forced* to establish a 'personal' impression with which he can inflect the presentation of walking tours in the books he has hitherto merely passively consumed.

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[297] Beer, p. 10.

[298] Thus, while Symonds sees Plato's untroubled celebration of homoerotic attraction as a direct connection between himself and the historical realities of forms of feeling that had definitely existed in Greek culture, he also describes how his homosexuality leads him to identify with the female erotic gaze in works by Shakespeare and Marlowe (*Memoirs*, pp. 62-63, 78).

vi. 'Truth does matter': living with the other

In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster suggests that an ideal approach to the literary canon would be not only historically conscious but also, in being resolutely subjective, fundamentally ahistorical at the same time. While the pseudo-scholar classifies books according to pre-assigned taxonomies, new insights can only be gained if one imagines all novelists 'seated together in a room […] all writing their novels simultaneously' (*Aspects of the Novel*, 8). While many frameworks exist for establishing literary-historical 'tendencies', argues Forster, in practice readers themselves inevitably become the locus for new relationships between the various kinds of texts they read – there will always be a reader-specific framework inescapably other to established modes of understanding:

> It is part of [the reader's] business to see literature steadily and to see it whole; and this is eminently to see it *not* as consecrated by time, but to see it beyond time. (*Aspects of the Novel*, 23)

For Symonds, as with Forster, to see literature as 'beyond time' emerges from a recognition, not necessarily of literature's ability to enshrine transcendent meanings and 'timeless' values, but of the production of textual meaning as something that goes on between the reader and the text. In both conceptualisations, 'reading' has little to do with what has been done to the text in the past, and everything to do with the reading subject in the present. This, according to Stout, is the epistemological principle that must fundamentally underlie any study of unlettered prehistory, whose intrinsic 'otherness' emphasises the inescapably contingent nature of the socio-political present

in which it is read. Forster's fictions reflect this. They are peopled with readers whose connection with texts occurs at the precise point that their readings reveal their own inevitable otherness from the dominant socio-political forms of the present.

The second of *The Longest Journey*'s three sections, culminating in a visit to Rickie's school by his Cambridge friend Ansell, is an example. While waiting for Rickie to meet him, Ansell encounters Stephen Wonham, Rickie's illegitimate half-brother. Stephen has come to beg assistance from Rickie, having been abandoned by his one-time patron, Mrs Failing. Under the influence of his wife, Agnes, Rickie had previously disowned Stephen, ashamed of this blood connection with the lower orders and of the stain on the character of the dead mother whose memory he venerates. The section ends with Ansell, disgusted at his friend's prejudice, revealing Stephen's existence to the whole school, who are gathered in the great hall – much to Rickie and Agnes's horror. The initial confrontation between Ansell and Stephen, of whose identity the former is at this point unaware, involves the symbolic use of a book of socialist essays entitled *What We Want*, written by Rickie's uncle (Mrs Failing's husband). Stephen and Ansell fight, flinging the book at each other in a manner that literalises the underlying conflict, as both parties attempt to classify the other as a representative of their social class. After the fight is concluded, Ansell demands of Stephen: 'What are you? […] Who are you—your name—I don't care about that. But it interests me to class people, and up to now I have failed with you' (*The Longest Journey*, 217).

Denying Stephen an individual identity, Ansell initially thinks of him not in terms of 'who' but of 'what'. Stephen's answer reveals his liminal social position: related by blood to 'old money', but disgraced by his illegitimacy, and abandoned by his respectable patron, he claims really not to 'know what I am', much less what he

'wants'. Stephen's response to Ansell's enquiry regarding 'what' he is, reflects the impossibility of answering that question without recourse to any existing social taxonomy, involuntarily emerging as a statement of purely *personal* identity: '"I—" He stopped.' Not knowing how to classify himself, Stephen is reduced to a personal pronoun. Ansell is impressed, turning back on his previous desire to classify and concluding: 'One belongs to the place one sleeps in and to the people one eats with'. Having come to this conclusion, a 'silence, akin to poetry, invaded Ansell' (*The Longest Journey*, 217). The book of socialist essays, with which they have literally beaten each other, now lies 'a good deal shattered […] between them', representing a barrier that has been physically and metaphorically broken down. Control over his own identity – over the 'I' – is thus restored to Stephen, and 'silence' replaces Ansell's impulse to classify.

The narrator describes Ansell's encounter with Stephen as 'a momentary encounter with reality' (*The Longest Journey*, 226); yet that 'reality' appears to be simply the reality of the absence – the 'silence akin to poetry' – that invariably underlies the attempt to enslave lived experience to existing taxonomies, which *What We Want* (however well intentioned) represents. As with Leonard's move away from books to experience at first hand a walk through the woods, Ansell's fight with Stephen is another example of 'seeing for oneself' the things about which one has, hitherto, only read. As with Forster's comments in *Aspects of the Novel*, the episode figures the socio-historical 'reality' of the text as ultimately less relevant than the personal response of readers – in the face of a complex living example of the unfortunates it champions, the socio-political generalisations of *What We Want* dissolve into a 'silence akin to poetry'.

The episode foregrounds both the poverty and value of books in Forster's narratives, in which written texts – be they *The Stones of Venice*, *Virginibus Puerisque*

or *What We Want* – come to symbolise, like Ansell's cow, contrasting accounts of what is or is not really 'there'. Like all pupils, the scholarly reader is in danger of becoming a subject, of seeing only what books tell him is 'there'. Thus, in *The Longest Journey*, *What We Want* becomes a symbolic site upon which the book's sweeping generalisations about social 'realities', though not necessarily inhumane, are reduced to a literal conflict between two individuals, reflecting metonymically the way in which the meaning of the book itself represents a dynamic relationship between reader and text. The novel prefigures *Howards End*'s injunction to 'see for oneself', challenging the idea that there is, in the book, anything really 'there' at all – that ideas written down betray an inevitable poverty when contrasted with the inescapable plurality of readerly experience.

Where Angels Fear to Tread (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908) put guidebooks to a similar symbolic use, demonstrating the way in which pre-written accounts destroy the tourist's ability to connect personally with Italy. Philip Herriton, we are told, 'could never read "The view from the Rocca (small gratuity) is finest at sunset" without a catching at the heart', while Lucy Honeychurch 'commit[s] to memory the most important dates of Florentine History' in order to ensure 'enjoy[ment] […] on the morrow'.[299] Such passages reflect their fetishisation of Italy as a country described not only by someone else, but also for a reader who will inevitably experience it in a manner carefully regulated by the apparatus of a tourist industry that presents countries as sites of a reified history, culture and geography, viewable for a 'small gratuity'. Conversely, the ordeals that beset both of them when they abandon

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[299] Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), p. 17 and *A Room With a View* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 11. Further references are to these editions and appear in the body of the text.

their Baedekers illustrate precisely the horrors that such works are designed to shield them from in the first place.

This is not to argue a simplistic assertion, on the novels' part, that abandoning Baedeker will magically precipitate a revelation of the 'real Italy'. As James Buzard notes, guidebook-assisted tourism is the means through which Forster's Italian novels illustrate 'that the approach to "the real" in culture or history proceeds through some "prior textualisation", and that the urge for a new start, a reform that would sweep away all previous texts […] finds utterance in only another text'.[300] In Lucy's case, this might be most obviously exemplified in the presentation of her passionate embrace with George Emerson. Initially, this would seem to bear out Buzard's assertion that Lucy is 'a powerless and sexually naïve protagonist […] [who] lurks behind the screen of custom, class, and sex that guards the tourist from contact with indigenous life', so that the 'boundary dividing that phoney culture which is tailored to tourists' needs from "the authentic" is identified with the hymen locking Lucy in aloof virginity'.[301] According to such a reading, Forster's novel is itself guilty of pandering to cultural stereotypes by enlisting 'an image of violent penetration to shatter the boundaries of touristic proprieties' in the incident where Lucy goes off the beaten tourist track and sees the murder in the square.[302] On the one hand, this signals the presence of the common Forsterian discrepancy between reading and personal experience:

> In this scheme, the tourist is the public image of the sexually uninitiated or even maladjusted individual, the virgin or voyeur, who has never learned to 'really live'. The association of sexual and cultural roles helps to sustain an extensive

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[300] James Buzard, 'Forster's Trespasses: Tourism and Cultural Politics', in *E.M. Forster: Contemporary Critical Essays (New Casebooks)*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 14-29 (14).
[301] Ibid. p. 16.
[302] Ibid. p. 17.

symbolic opposition between images reflecting deep involvement in the
elemental and images reflecting the merely spectatorial relation of tourism and
sightseeing.[303]

At the same time, argues Buzard, the use of 'the stereotypical image of the male Italian
as a fount of uncontrollable passions' means that Forster 'appears to participate in the
same kind of exploitation of Italian life and culture he was elsewhere so concerned to
criticise […] [by transforming] his own symbol of authenticity, the Italian male body,
into an instrument entirely subsumed in its function within an English plot'.[304]

According to such a reading, the sudden embrace with George Emerson merely
represents the culmination of a trajectory in which the stereotypical association of
passion with the Mediterranean south simply validates a very English idea of what it
means to 'really live'. Buzard echoes John Carey's argument that the scene in the
piazza 'is designed to tell us that the world of passion and casual violence in which the
Italian masses live was the world that produced the great artworks that Lucy buys her
emasculated photographic replicas of'.[305] That is, the postcards, like Baedeker's
account, simply elide the 'real' passion that the physical brawl restores, in a manner
that insultingly fixes the Italian population as a hotbed of passion and vice – the
extreme 'other' of English gentility and restraint.

In this sense the argument might also be applied to 'Count Magnus', in M.R.
James's first story collection, whose protagonist, visiting a Scandinavian town with a
view to writing a book of travels, is unable to comprehend the visceral horror of the
legend he dilutes for the pleasure of his audience. The Swedish innkeeper who tells him

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[303] Ibid. pp. 17-18.
[304] Ibid. pp. 19-20.
[305] Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p. 34.

the horrific story of the aftermath of Magnus's death is cannier, however, comprehending only too well the abject abhorrence of the count's actions. For him, it is not a folktale, nor the stuff of picturesque tourism – it is a horror as real and tangible now as it was then: 'his face was not there, because the flesh of it was sucked away off the bones. You understand that?' (*Count Magnus*, 75). The question implicitly casts doubt, however, on Wraxall's ability to 'understand', on anything other than the most prosaic of levels, the terrible reality of the event. It not only reveals an imaginative obtuseness which, in typical Jamesian fashion, is Wraxall's downfall, but also the dangerous distortions that guidebooks can enact. Accepting Buzard's reading, one could also argue that James's protagonists resemble, like Forster's tourists, the 'virgin or the voyeur', on whom the rich viscerality of what it means to 'really live' rebounds in the most gruesome ways.[306]

There is, undeniably, a conflict between *A Room With a View*'s differentiation of the foreign other's passionate 'authenticity' and the prosaic dilution of sanctioned textual representations, which Lucy finally breaches when she succumbs to George Emerson's advances. Yet it is nevertheless doubtful whether this conflict endorses, in the novel, a straightforward transition from the 'phoney culture' of the guidebook to the transcendent reality of Italian passion. Ultimately, while Lucy's emotional and sexual awakenings are shown to be *more* 'authentic' than the sanctions of the middle-class tourism they transgress, they are never allowed to seem the embodiment of a reality so 'authentic' that it transcends the subjective textual 'view' of Lucy the reader.

In the second half of the novel, Lucy unexpectedly finds that her encounter with George has been used by fellow tourist Eleanor Lavish for the plot of a badly-written

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[306] For a reading of James's ghost as emblems of the protagonists' (and the author's) repressed sexualities see Fielding, 'Reading Rooms' and Ferdinand Mount, 'A Life Without a Jolt', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (26 Jan 2012), pp. 23-24.

romantic novel. Yet, her reaction to this revelation that 'Miss Lavish […] had printed the past in draggled prose, for Cecil to read and for George to hear' is ambivalent (*Room With a View*, 157). The prose is certainly terrible and the narrative convoluted. In fact, the book validates Cecil's flippant dismissal of modern novels on the grounds that '[e]very one writes for money in these days' (*Room With a View*, 155). At the same time, however, Cecil is mistaken in seeing in the novel only the barely literate melodrama of the romantic bestseller. As the narrator describes, even this drivel is capable of eliciting an emotional conflict in Lucy, whose experiences mean that the text has, for her, a terrible personal significance:

> Love felt and returned, love which our bodies exact and our hearts have transfigured, love which is the most real thing that we shall ever meet, reappeared now as the world's enemy, and she must stifle it. […] The contest […] lay between the real and the pretended, and Lucy's first aim was to defeat herself. […] Tampering with the truth, she forgot that the truth had ever been. (*Room With a View*, 159)

This 'truth' that the novel recalls is most emphatically not something already enshrined within Miss Lavish's story, nor in Italy itself: the novel does not, that is, enshrine a 'real' Italian experience that Cecil fails to grasp. Rather, it represents an emotional experience which, for Lucy, is authentic, but which Cecil fails to imagine – which Lucy, indeed, perceives as a passion quite the reverse of Cecil's prosaic reaction to the novel as simply a collection of grammatical errors. The sheer badness of the writing demonstrates the way in which the events that took place in Italy are not 'authentic' in themselves, but require Lucy emotionally to apprehend the 'authenticity' of those

experiences. That this is a truth that only the individual reader is capable of admitting or repressing demonstrates the subjectivity of such 'authenticity', locating it within the observer's reactions and not within that which is observed – not within the view glimpsed from a hotel room, but within the gaze of the individual that inevitably comes between the room and the view. Cecil's failure to anticipate the validity of the emotions Miss Lavish describes demonstrates that there is no 'authentic' meaning already enshrined within the book in advance, without a reader to reciprocate it. However, it also demonstrates Cecil's inability to imagine anything other than the most surface reading of the novel, which leads him to characterise it as a production that would inevitably strike every possible reader as woefully 'inauthentic'. Through Cecil's obtuse dismissal of the novel on the grounds that fiction is either authentic or not, regardless of who reads it, *A Room With a View* denies any attempt on its own part to present itself as an authentic portrait of Italy or even of the Italian experience, settling instead for a metatextual point about the way in which books simply reflect (or fail to reflect) the reader's own 'view'. Buzard and Carey argue that Forster posits a fantasy of an authentic Italy against the inauthentic Italy of guidebooks while, in fact, the episode of Miss Lavish's novel emphasises not only that the real Italy never emerges in a novel, but also that it is, in *A Room With a View*, never really meant to.

While the novel disparages the reliance on Baedeker's Italy, it ends by presenting the reader not with the real Italy, but with what might be called 'Lucy's Italy'. In fact, Forster is far more concerned with the way in which the emergence of that abstraction mirrors the emergence of the 'real Lucy'. As with Symonds's use of Plato to work through his own troubling erotic impulses, Lucy's recollections of Italy establish, only to repress, a personal response to her experiences there which Mr Emerson senior anxiously urges her to acknowledge: '"Now it is all dark. Now Beauty

and Passion seem never to have existed. I know. But remember the mountains over Florence and the view […] for we fight for more than Love or Pleasure; there is Truth. Truth counts, Truth does count"' (*Room With a View*, 203). The 'Truth' here is the emotional one that Lucy loves George: an intensely personal truth at the heart, not of Italy, but of Lucy's personal associations with it.

Lucy mistakenly attributes Emerson's insistence on her affections for George to precisely the kind of stereotyping that Buzard and Carey attribute to Forster himself: 'Oh, how like a man […] to suppose that a woman is always thinking about a man.' Yet, as Emerson points out to Lucy, his judgement has little to do with universal truths and more to do with an observation on one particular 'personal relation' which, in this instance, happens to be true: 'But you are', he points out (*Room With a View*, 201). As he explains, he is not attempting to teach Lucy about the authenticity of one model for male-female relations, but about a specific emotional truth that she herself resolutely represses: not one view of what the world is 'really' like, but a way of 'seeing' in which the plurality of experiences – a multitude of 'views', including one's own – can be confronted and engaged with dynamically.

In *A Room With a View*, therefore, Emerson's faith in the imaginative sympathy of 'personal relations' comes to the protagonist's rescue in a manner that underlines precisely the point about the politics of reading that Symonds makes. The clergyman's study, in which Emerson and Lucy meet, is lined with imposing volumes: 'She looked at the books again—black, brown, and that acrid theological blue. They surrounded the visitors on every side; they were piled on the tables, they pressed against the very ceiling' (*Room With a View*, 198). When Emerson begins to talk about Italy, Lucy hides herself behind a volume of Old Testament commentaries: 'Holding it up to her eyes, she said: "I have no wish to discuss Italy or any subject connected with your son." […]

Feeling a little steadier, she put the book back and turned round to him' (*Room With a View*, 195-96). If, earlier in the novel, Baedeker signifies the commodification of tourism along stultifying philistine grounds, then here the association of Old Testament morality with Lucy's recollections demonstrates the way in which books function as talismanic symbols, guarding against the subjective emotional reality of dissident experience – and of dissident reading. Forster thus harbours a fundamentally different attitude to Wilde. Both reject the book as a site of reified textual meaning, but Forster also formulates, in contrast, an idea of the individual self as a collection of emotions and views which, like Ansell's cow, are really 'there' – if only they could be consciously acknowledged, embraced and expressed. By associating Lucy's awakening apprehension of the authenticity of her own 'views' with an injunction to win 'a victory' over books, *A Room With a View* draws out the political implications of what, in M.R. James, represents a purely academic dilemma regarding the recovery of meaning from a past that remains resolutely other. This most optimistic of Forster's novels is allied with Symonds's reading of Plato and anticipates Stout's critique of archaeological 'reading' by presenting the book as a site on which the validity of the individual's own experiences – as a reader and as a human being – can be asserted as a 'truth' that does, indeed, 'count'.

Conclusion

'No More Literary Works and No More Readers'

Characterising an underlying anxiety in late-nineteenth-century literature, Kate Flint points to a developing realisation that would come obviously to fruition in the growth of modernism: 'perhaps there is no truth, no centre at all, only different angles of vision':[307]

> By the end of the [nineteenth] century, the notion of what constituted a 'centre',
> what a periphery, could no longer be voiced with unquestioned confidence. [...]
> If powerful social groupings attempted to invest certain types of writing, music,
> or theatrical entertainment with particular values, they were doing so in the light
> of expanding literacy, and a multiplicity of new voices expressing themselves in
> print.[308]

As Flint implies, and as I have emphasised in my introductory chapter, the notion of an increasingly multivalent print culture raised concerns in the late nineteenth century, because it seemed to represent both the cause and the symptom of a dramatically fractured socio-political 'centre'.

In this thesis, I have argued that, in the fiction of a number of late-nineteenth-century writers, books symbolise the fragmentation of the 'centre', by revealing, as anything but 'peripheral', the position of the reader in the recovery of textual meaning. These fictions deploy books as symbols of different kinds of 'centres' – generic, social,

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[307] Kate Flint, 'Literature, music, and the theatre' in *The Nineteenth Century,* ed. Colin Matthew (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 229-53 (252).
[308] Ibid. p. 253.

gendered, racial and even academic – only to expose their vulnerability as sites on which their authority is contested in the face of an advancing modernity and the reader's uniquely individualistic position within it. Books, in these works, represent the social and moral accoutrements of a vanished age of certainty. Yet, the dominant idea of books as purveyors of certainties also empowers an alternative semiotics of the book. For, by emphasising the pivotal role of the reading subject in the recovery of meaning from texts, books are presented not only as facilitators of knowledge external to the self, but also as opportunities to bring into new and transitory coherences the particular nexus of experiences, beliefs and attitudes that make up the unique and complex entity of the self-as-reader.

Wilde's decadent ideas about the self's completely autonomous relationship with art of all kinds leads him to make a clean break not only with the idea of literature as a reflection of a coherent 'real', but also from any school of thought that posits an authentic 'reality' outside of textual representation. Stevenson, James and Forster do not go so far, yet they express – in different ways – the suggestion that the authenticity of experience itself must consist partly of what readers bring to books, rather than of that which is already immanent within the literary text. A Ruskinian model of books as passive storehouses for gaining either useful knowledge or an elevating insight into eternal 'truths' is rejected in their work. Hence, in an affecting passage from *In the South Seas* (1896), Stevenson inverts Wells's idea of humanity's future relationship with books. Stevenson is moved, by the stoicism with which a young Beretani mother imagines the prospect of her race's impending extinction, to contemplate the end of humanity itself:

> [I]n a perspective of centuries I saw their case as ours, death coming in like a
>
> tide, and the day already numbered when there should be no more Beretani, and
>
> no more of any race whatever, and (what oddly touched me) no more literary
>
> works and no more readers.[309]

Clare Harman sees the 'utter oblivion of "*no more literary works and no more*

readers"' as an 'appalling prospect for this childless man […] truly a fate worse than

death'.[310] Harman's biographical account of Stevenson as a 'childless man' with only a

literary issue is convincing and moving, but it misses the wider pathos envisaged in this

world of books without readers. Wells's Time Traveller is shocked to discover that the

world of the far future contains potential readers who have simply neglected this vast

storehouse of knowledge and have degenerated as a result. In Stevenson's conception,

however, the end of 'literary works' is not a 'fate worse than death', it *is* death – not

only for humanity, but also for 'literary works'. For Wells, to imagine a world of books

without readers is to imagine the degeneration of readers in the face of the splendour of

that which books always already contain – and, therefore, always *will* contain. In

Stevenson's vision, however, literary works and readers die together, since the one

cannot really exist without the other. In this sense, the death of the Beretani people and

their oral culture has its imaginative equivalent in the death of *readers* in Western print

culture. In both cases, the meaning of a particular culture is located not within one

central repository but within the conditions governing the encounter.

Accordingly, Stevenson's emphasis on the material conditions of textual

production not only throws into relief the particular physicality of the finished product,

but also serves to emphasise the appropriate performance (on the reader's and the

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[309] Stevenson, *In the South Seas* (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 22-23.
[310] Clare Harman, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Biography* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), pp. 364-65.

writer's part) demanded by the market conditions in which the product is sold. It endorses the plurality of forms the physical book can take, but ultimately it is the market itself that, in tying certain generic and stylistic expectations to certain kinds of physical forms, shapes ideas about how the book is written and read. James's stories have little, if anything, to say about the literary marketplace. Yet their emphasis on the way in which the expectations that frame a particular reading experience threaten to rob the reader of autonomy and stifle new and equally significant readings links them with Wilde's and Stevenson's outputs. In James's tales, as in Forster's, the encounter with the book is proscribed by particular kinds of academic reading practices, just as, for Stevenson, they are proscribed in advance by the market and just as, for Wilde, they are proscribed in advance by a dominant utilitarian insistence on books as the agents of truth about the world. In all these cases, readers are urged to be aware of the proscriptions that govern their reading in advance – to be aware of the book as an object an encounter with which serves to emphasise not only themselves as readers, but also themselves as 'selves'.

This inescapable relationship between the book and the self is, as the above quotation from Stevenson demonstrates, given a pathetic inflection when the death of both is imagined in conjunction with each other. A further touching example occurs in a speech given by James, as Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, to mark the beginning of the new academic year. The speech was delivered on 1 October 1914, not long after the outbreak of the First World War. In it, James considers movingly the role of academic pursuits in the midst of a global military conflict:

> The University meets in such circumstances as it has never known. […] Yet
> there is no doubt that we are bound to carry on our work; for by it we can render

definite service to the nation. Our part […] [is] to keep alive that fire of

'education, religion, learning, and research' which will in God's good time

outburn the flame of war. Let us devote ourselves to making useful men of the

new generation. Let us confine our own controversies within the narrowest

limits, and be ready if necessary to postpone them altogether. Let our advanced

work – however irrelevant it may seem to the needs of the moment – be

unremittingly and faithfully pursued.[311]

Like *fin de siècle* debates about the book, which frame the writing of all the texts

studied in this thesis, James's rallying call recognises the need to find and express an

anchoring certainty in the face of apparently cataclysmic dissolution, whilst also

recognising the need for compromise and individual expression. It is a speech that

attempts to cling to old practices in a climate that appears to call for their complete

abandonment or to emphasise their obsolescence. Hence, it offers, simultaneously, a

spirited defence of academic endeavours for their own sake and an equal readiness to

'postpone them altogether' should that become necessary. It also concedes that the

work of 'our medical schools' would be especially useful – more useful, ultimately,

than the hours of antiquarian research in which he himself was engaged.[312] It implies a

truth beyond the horrors of the present reality which diligent research, 'unremittingly

and faithfully pursued' might finally unearth. Yet it fails to offer any concrete outline of

the kind of useful truth that might be found by poking about in old books. In a circular

argument, only the transcendence of this sought-for logos – its status as finally and

eternally 'true' – can be insisted upon with certainty.

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[311] Quoted in Stephen Gaselee, 'Montague Rhodes James, 1862-1936' [1936] in *Warnings to the Curious*, ed. Joshi and Pardoe, pp. 15-27 (23).
[312] Ibid.

Its ambiguity helps us to connect the speech with James's tales, which he also continued 'unremittingly' to compose. In these, James implies with Forster that if truth 'does count' it is not to be found in a 'scholarly' reading of the books that surround their protagonists at every point. Rather, they join Wilde and Stevenson in suggesting that the 'truth' that emerges from reading is conditional upon the particular experiences of the self-as-reader – something books always end up reflecting: that books 'count' only insofar as they reflect the reader who encounters them and the circumstances in which that reading takes place. In James's fiction as in Forster's, Stevenson's and Wilde's, a book's capacity to reveal the 'truth' exists in direct proportion to the reader's ability to inflect it with individual nuance. It is a truth about 'truth', revealing that intangible commodity to be not a matter of absolute value, but of material realities variously expressed in texts susceptible to an equal number of individual readings.

This has obvious resonance in late-nineteenth-century formulations that saw the expanding and increasing plurality of print culture as – for better or worse – a reflection of an authoritative centre's disintegration into a multiplicity of competing voices. Yet, at the outset of a catastrophic war in which a reified patriotism and imperialism – a worship of the national 'centre' wilfully embraced and brutally enforced – led to the deaths of countless millions, the idea that readers should look to books not as repositories of eternal 'values', but as opportunities to bring their own experiences to bear upon the amassed certainties that books appear to enshrine, takes on an almost unbearable poignancy. Ultimately, what is perhaps most moving about James's speech is the way in which its guarded endorsement of the military encounter is coupled with an equally guarded endorsement of the literary encounter that constitutes academic research. Read alongside his stories, it seems to assert that a recognition of reading as the scene of an encounter between the self and the 'other' might 'in God's good time

outburn the flame of war' – but it also devastatingly implies its failure, to date, to have done just that. Meanwhile, Stevenson's melancholic prediction of death washing over Western culture 'like a tide' was horribly borne out as a whole generation of readers perished in the melee of battle: a horrifying spectacle in which 'truths' that really did 'count', were silenced prematurely in the 'dazzle and confusion' of brutally assertive 'reality'.

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When referring to essays in a collection in which more than one essay has been referenced, reference to the collection is made in short form. The full citation for the collection is given separately under the name of the editor(s).

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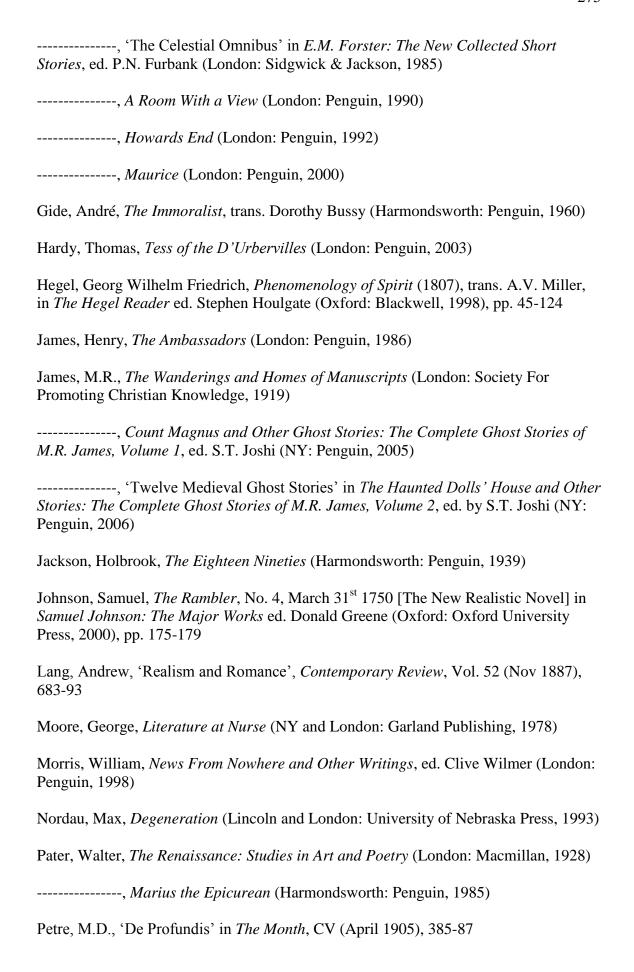
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