

Encounters with art-objects in discourse network 1890

Submitted by Dominique Gracia to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English
in March 2017

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Abstract

What can the study of Victorian literature gain from approaching primary texts explicitly as processing, storing, and transmitting data? I suggest that, by applying tools and methodologies from German media history that are usually reserved for technical and digital media, we can illuminate how individual texts operate and better understand Victorian texts as media, which remains an underdeveloped aspect of materialist literary study.

In analysing how Victorian texts depict encounters with traditional plastic art-objects, I develop new applications of Friedrich Kittler's ideas of recursion and transposition, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's method of reading for *Stimmung*, and the theory of cultural techniques (*Kulturtechniken*). I also propose new concepts to further our understanding of how encounters with art-objects function, such as the observer effect: the simultaneous perception of past and future meanings of an art-object.

Close readings of Michael Field's *Sight and Song* and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ballads and Sonnets* suggest that both volumes acknowledge encounter as a cultural technique, rather than a spontaneous, independent action by the subject. Yet they propose different roles for themselves within that technique. Michael Field's poems purport to halt the process of recursion, but Rossetti's demand that readers experience their own observer effects. Meanwhile, Vernon Lee's *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* demonstrate the agency of art-objects vis-à-vis the cultural technique of encounter. Lee's stories reveal the threat to an individual subject's production of future meanings that art-objects pose, in particular through their effects of presence. In *Dorian Gray*, the art-object's own data processing circumscribes the subject's observer effect.

Each text thus evidences its operations as a medium and its complicated relationships with other media in the form of art-objects. Each processes data; recurs to art-objects, tropes, or themes and transmits future meanings thereof; and participates in the cultural technique of encounter. In so doing, these texts resisted the threats of marginalisation that faced 'old media' from the rise of photography and the incipient development of film at the *fin de siècle*.

Acknowledgments

I have been fortunate to receive the support and guidance of a number of colleagues at the University of Exeter and elsewhere. The frank advice, support and guidance of Professor Regenia Gagnier, Dr Kate Hext, and Dr Alex Murray have been invaluable. Professor Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht at Stanford University and Professor David Trotter of the University of Cambridge have also given generously of their time to discuss methodology, for which I am deeply grateful.

I should also thank Dr Jake Vaughan, Dr Christopher Johnson, and Chloe Mawson for their support and encouragement, which helped make this research possible, and Dr Johnson in particular for the unexpected discussions of Tennyson, which are always a blessing.

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Introduction

*The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impressions of beautiful things.*¹

The critic translates; the critic is impressed; but first, she must *encounter* the beautiful things that otherwise define her action. This study focuses on how four late-nineteenth-century British texts stage encounters with beautiful things in the form of real or imagined art-objects. Each text reveals a distinct type of encounter: a pedagogic encounter, in Michael Field's volume of ekphrastic poetry, *Sight and Song* (1892); a visionary encounter, in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881); a haunted encounter, in Vernon Lee's *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890); and finally a jealous encounter, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-1).² These four texts provide a set of models of engagement with 'old media', both voluntary and not.

The late-nineteenth century witnessed significant changes in Western visual culture. In the decades leading up to the advent of film in 1895,³ photography and other visual technologies pervaded everyday life, and the situation of old media, such as traditional paintings and sculptures, became fraught. Meanwhile, literary writing was also under pressure, both from the rise of visual technologies and from changes in the reading public and the publishing market. The traditional art-object and the literary text come together in the genre of ekphrasis, which I use as a starting point for exploring how *fin-de-siècle* literature argued for the continued relevance of old media, and its own, at that moment of transition.

Recent criticism has explored technological developments and the changes in mid-to-late-nineteenth-century visual and material culture through

¹ Oscar Wilde, 'Preface', in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981; repr. 1998), pp.xxiii-xxiv (p.xxiii)

² *Sight and Song* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892); *Ballads and Sonnets* (London: F.S. Ellis, 1881); *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, 2nd edition (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1906); *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012)

³ Film histories usually place the first film screening resembling modern cinema in Berlin in 1895. That same year, the Lumière brothers presented their cinema projector.

topics such as photography⁴ and glass production,⁵ with Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* serving as a key text.⁶ However, I consider the resistance of old media to some of those changes. In this way, my study is also distinct from longitudinal analyses of medial change, such as Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree's study of new media in the historical moments in which they emerged, or Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn's exploration of the aesthetics of moments of medial transition.⁷ My focus here is on the inertia against, rather than the momentum of, medial change at the *fin de siècle*.

In focusing on old media and an old genre—ekphrasis can be traced back to Achilles' shield in *The Iliad*—I also want to propose a new methodological approach to literary texts. Victorian studies' materialist turn has opened up diverse areas for investigation, and throughout this study I draw on the insights of such work.⁸ Yet most critical approaches remain fundamentally sociological in their concerns. For example, introductions to nineteenth-century visual culture often prioritise the views of "bourgeois society", which "esteemed objects for their exchange value".⁹ Criticism frequently explores luxury production, the implications of *l'art pour l'art* for the marketplace, and symbolic

⁴ See, for example, Jennifer Green-Lewis' *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), or Daniel A. Novak's 'A Literature of its Own: Time, Space, and Narrative Mediations in Victorian Photography', in *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century: Image, Sound, Touch*, ed. by Margaret Linley and Colette Colligan (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp.65-90.

⁵ See Isobel Armstrong's innovative study, *Victorian Glassworlds. Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

⁶ *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990)

⁷ *New Media, 1740–1915* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003); *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003)

⁸ Regenia Gagnier's *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* opened up this field (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), which includes Jerome McGann's work on the physicality of literary texts, as in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), John Barclay's 'Consuming Artifacts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Aesthetic Economy', *Victorian Poetry*, 35.1 (1997), 1-21, and Elizabeth Helsinger's *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁹ Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, 'Visual Culture's History: Twenty-first century interdisciplinarity and its nineteenth-century objects', in *The Nineteenth Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.3-14 (p.9). Similarly, Stephen Arata identifies aestheticism as "primarily a middle-class affair" ('The *fin de siècle*', in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.124-50 (p.142)). Jonathan Freedman has argued that autonomy of art, although ostensibly liberating art from market forces, in fact assimilated it to the market ethos of consumerism (*Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.59).

economies.¹⁰ Much of this work draws either explicitly on the theories of the Frankfurt School, such as Jonathan Freedman's development of Theodor Adorno's theories in *Professions of Taste*, or relies implicitly on that school's focus on the ideological values underpinning material and medial conditions.¹¹

While such criticism has proven fruitful, and I strongly support the illumination of gender and class dynamics within our period of study, such an approach nevertheless elides the fact that many of the objects at hand are media, which operate not only as things for human purchase and consumption, but also in ways dictated by their own logic. While aestheticism can be seen as “the poetry of the culture of consumption” because it emphasises experiencing art, denying “the value of art for anything but satisfying the eager, appropriative gaze of the spectator”, I propose interpreting this fact as indicative of the art-object's own logic, which may have little to do with economics.¹² To focus on the former, rather than the latter, we must take a more theoretical approach to the question of how art-objects operate as media and formalise some of our concerns about how literary texts treat material art-objects. In the remainder of this introduction, I set out a theoretical framework that can help us to conceptualise the agency of art-objects as things-in-the-world and the relationships between media, building on the work of media historian Friedrich

¹⁰ A recent volume is dedicated to “economies of desire” (*Economies of Desire at the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Libidinal Lives*, ed. by Jane Ford, Kim Edwards Keates and Patricia Pulham (London: Routledge, 2015)). The metaphor ‘symbolic economy’ draws on Jean-Joseph Goux's work re-evaluating Karl Marx's economic model and Sigmund Freud's model of the unconscious. See, for example, Goux's *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. by Jennifer Curtiss Gage (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Margaret Cohen and Anne Higonnet remark on a “cult of Walter Benjamin” in visual culture studies (‘Complex Culture’, in *The Nineteenth Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Schwartz and Przyblyski, pp.15-26 (p.15)). In Victorian studies, examples aside from Freedman include: Ana Parejo Vadillo's analysis of *Sight and Song*, which draws particularly on ‘The Task of the Translator’ (‘Sight and Song: Transparent Translations and a Manifesto for the Observer’, *Victorian Poetry*, 38 (2000), 15-34); Helsinger's *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, which draws on the idea of the Benjaminian aura with regard to uncanny portraits by Rossetti and others; Sam George's “‘He make in the mirror no reflect’: undead aesthetics and mechanical reproduction – Dorian Gray, Dracula and David Reed's “vampire painting””, in *Open graves, open minds: Representations of vampires and the Undead from the Enlightenment to the present day*, ed. by Sam George and Bill Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp.56-78; and Norman Kelvin's essay ‘The Painting as Physical Object in a Verbal Portrait: Pater's “A Prince of Court Painters” and Wilde's “The Portrait of Mr W.H.”’, in *Victorian Aesthetic Conditions: Pater Across the Arts*, ed. by Elicia Clements and Lesley J. Higgins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.117-34, which employs Benjamin's retrospective view of the nineteenth century to support his understanding of the position of photography in the *fin de siècle*.

¹² Freedman, *Professions*, p.59

Kittler and the developing theory of cultural techniques (*Kulturtechniken*) that has its roots in Kittler's approach.

A Kittlerian toolkit

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young has done more than perhaps any other scholar to bring Kittler's work to an anglophone audience, and his work provides detailed *résumés* of Kittler's outputs. In brief, however, Winthrop-Young summarises Kittler's major theses as follows: "materialities of communication determine literary texts"; "data-processing networks determine entire epochs a.k.a. 'discourse networks'"; and "the evolution of technology shapes, uses and discards man".¹³ Of themselves, these three statements may appear intuitive to those adopting a materialist approach, excepting perhaps the breadth of "epoch" and the strength of "uses and discards".¹⁴ Nevertheless, Kittler's work is rarely used in literary criticism, in large part because his arguments often alienate those who engage in what he terms "a trivial, content-based approach to media", or whose studies focus on people as producers or consumers of media.¹⁵

Amongst literary critics, Kittler's work is most often taken up by those dealing with modernist and post-modernist authors, and science fiction.¹⁶ Literary studies that use Kittler's work commonly turn to his early theory of discourse networks, which he summarises as the "technologies and

¹³ *Kittler and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), pp.17-8

¹⁴ When his first major book, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, was published in its third edition in 1996, Kittler reflected with surprise on how "a complete outsider-book" become "an insider-book" because the materiality of communication had become a topic of both popular and academic discourse ('Technologies of Writing: Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler', *New Literary History*, 27.4 (1996), 731-42 (p.731)).

¹⁵ *Optical Media*, trans. by Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p.31. Kittler's writing on literary works is indeed disinterested in the bulk of their content, as in 'Dracula's Legacy', trans. by William Stephen Davis, *Stanford Humanities Reviews*, 1.1 (1989), 143-73, first published as 'Draculas Vermächtnis', *Zeta 02/Mit Lacan*, ed. by Dieter Hombach (Berlin: Rotation, 1982), pp.103-37. Winthrop-Young provides a clear and detailed analysis of why Kittler has been so little, and only partially, taken up in the anglosphere in 'Krautrock, Heidegger, Bogeyman: Kittler in the anglosphere' (*thesis eleven*, 107.1 (2011), 6-20).

¹⁶ For example, Anthony Enns, in 'Media, Drugs, and Schizophrenia in the Works of Philip K. Dick', *Science Fiction Studies*, 33.1 (2006), 68-88, demonstrates how Dick's works illustrate Kittler's claim that the unconscious follows a media logic. Gill Partington's, 'Friedrich Kittler's "Aufschreibesystem"', *Science Fiction Studies*, 33.1 (2006), 53-67, which introduces that edition, argues for Kittler's relevance to the genre.

institutions”—such as texts, photographs, archives and museums—“that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data”.¹⁷ (When thinking more narrowly about our medial and technological situation, Kittler refers to the ‘technical *a priori*’, a crucial subset of the former, and I use both terms.) The concept of discourse networks chimes with historicist methods commonly used in the humanities, and it is deliberately broad, describing the social, cultural, medial and technological situation in which an author or text is situated.

It is the concept of discourse networks that has been picked up in the fleeting examples of the explicit use of Kittler’s work as a possible methodological framework in nineteenth-century studies.¹⁸ In an essay envisaging a new form of poetry studies, Margaret Linley briefly refers to discourse networks to highlight how “new ways of relating poetry to matters of gender and national identity” might be derived from “the broad array of emergent, and increasingly state-sponsored, acculturation techniques”, which might otherwise be called cultural techniques, although that essay does not pursue that line of inquiry concretely.¹⁹ Going further, Clare Pettitt, in her analysis of mid-to-late-nineteenth-century industrial, sensation and detective novels, draws on Kittler to articulate how changing technology precipitated new literary genres. She ties sensation novels, which drew heavily on true crime and social scandal reportage, to “the growing network of national newspapers in the 1850s” and considers the effects of such texts on reader’s bodies, situating the reading subject within a medial flow that primed it to respond with goosebumps and shivers at the first hint of sensational subject matter.²⁰ Richard Menke, in his *Telegraphic Realism*, similarly employs Kittler’s work on discourse networks

¹⁷ *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.369

¹⁸ In looking to literary criticism that adopts a predominantly Kittlerian methodology, I exclude here instances where Kittler’s analysis of technological developments has been used alongside critics’ own as part of an examination of, for example, the development of the science of acoustics, as in Jason David Hall’s ‘Materializing Meter: Physiology, Psychology, Prosody’, *Victorian Poetry*, 49.2 (2011), 179-97. In this regard, Kittler’s work has penetrated a little more widely into the critical community addressing the influence upon literature of specific technologies, or drawing upon the history of science as part of a historicising move.

¹⁹ ‘Conjuring the Spirit: Victorian Poetry, Culture, and Technology’, *Victorian Poetry*, 41.4 (2003), 536-44 (p.541)

²⁰ “‘The annihilation of space and time’: literature and technology”, in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.550-72 (pp.561-2).

as a point of departure for his own analysis of electronic information systems in the nineteenth century.²¹

I propose to build on these first steps towards applying Kittler's concept of a discourse network to the nineteenth century; later in this introduction, I develop a detailed view of the discourse network in which my chosen texts were produced. First, however, I want to set out additional Kittlerian tools that have yet to make significant inroads into literary studies, but which I believe could be of value. One key term is 'recursion', which Kittler developed in his later work as a "new way of writing history" that allowed him to draw connections across disparate discourse networks, such as between reuses of the image of Achilles' shield throughout Western art.²² The term derives from mathematics, where it refers to the repeated application of a procedure to successive results. Various terms have already been used in literary studies to characterise this sort of relationship between texts and their antecedents, including terms such as 'rewriting' and 'pastiche'. However, these terms are often contested, as they bear a certain connotation of derivative-ness, inviting us to wonder who read what and when. By instead employing the term recursion, we foreground procedures that are always at work and the nature of each successive result as part of a chain, in lieu of interrogating subjects' intentions or responses, or conducting point-by-point comparative analyses.

Although Kittler's notion of recursion applies across medial or generic boundaries, it has a particular relevance to literature. As Steven Connor notes, "literature is not less but more mechanical than other forms of writing", in the sense that "literary texts electively model themselves [on] a calculative machinery" that is "like code", "do[ing] what it says".²³ Recursion is one of literature's "calculative" mechanisms, an operation that it undertakes (along with its authors and readers), and addressing literature in these terms can help us keep this mechanical nature of texts at the forefront of our minds. Although

²¹ *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008)

²² "Für diese neue Art, Geschichte zu erschreiben, gibt es nur eine Weise, einen Namen: Rekursionen", *Musik und Mathematik I/2: Eros* (Munich: Fink, 2009), p.245. I adopt here Winthrop-Young's translation, given in 'Siren Recursions', in *Kittler Now*, ed. by Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), pp.71-94 (p.73), which also provides an interesting aside on Kittler's style.

²³ 'How to Do Things With Writing Machines', *StevenConnor.com* <<http://stevenconnor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/writingmachines.pdf>> [accessed 17 March 2017], p.13

Connor refers in particular to modern literature, I hope to demonstrate that *fin-de-siècle* literature too attends to “the kind of machinery that it itself is”.²⁴

Key to recursion, and to my study, is the idea of repetition with change, of a repeated process leading to a different outcome. As Niklas Luhmann notes in one of a set of essays dedicated to recursion, recursions are far from “Output-Is-Input-Mechanisms” that result in mere copying.²⁵ I propose that, when encountering an art-object either ‘in the flesh’ or through ekphrasis, we experience an ‘observer effect’.²⁶ This term builds on Luhmann’s reading of recursions as allowing “an observer in the system” to “see past and future simultaneously”, highlighting the observer’s position as a witness to, and not master of, the event at hand.²⁷ Through recursion, one can experience both the prior and future meanings of the recurred-to symbol, image or idea.²⁸ In Kittler’s example of the story of *The Iliad* being recurred to by the Sirens’ song in *The Odyssey*, recursion results in a new output: a song, rather than an epic. Hearing that song, Odysseus, the observer within the narrative, can witness in his mind’s eye both the past meaning of the story (the epic battle) and the future meaning thereof (its mythic representation). Importantly, that future meaning, the mythic representation of the battle of Troy, is not the product of the Sirens’ recursive song, but the product of Odysseus’ observer effect, encapsulated in the frame narrative. The Sirens’ recursion, the necessary precursor to Odysseus’, produced a different future meaning—we can imagine it being somewhere along the lines of the wily warrior Odysseus being overcome by the Sirens—that is thwarted by Odysseus’ subsequent recursion and observer

²⁴ p.1

²⁵ “*Rekursivität liegt dann nicht nur in einem Output-wird-Input-Mechanismus*” (‘Antwort’, in *Rekursionen*, ed. by Ana Ofak and Philipp von Hilgers (Fink: Berlin, 2009), pp.47-50 (p.49, my translation)).

²⁶ I follow Kittler in adopting terminology from the hard sciences. In physics, the observer effect refers to changes that the act of observation makes on the phenomenon being observed.

²⁷ “*Rekursivität ... sondern darin, daß ein Beobachter im System ... zugleich Vergangenheit und Zukunft sieht*” (p.49, my translation).

²⁸ Some critics note this constant state of flux and tie it to human maturation. For example, Stefano Evangelista argues that the “meaning” of art-objects is “unstable as they are subjected to vital cycles of rereading and semantic renewal by each successive generation of viewers” (‘Vernon Lee in the Vatican: The Uneasy Alliance of Aestheticism and Archaeology’, *Victorian Studies*, 52.1 (2009), 31-41 (p.31)). This line of thinking ties to a common-sense impression of each generation seeking to diverge from its predecessor but does little to explain why the *same* art-objects are reinterpreted, not discarded. I hope here to respond both to this question of endurance as well as to the question of how “rereading”—a telling verb—and “semantic renewal” occur.

effect.²⁹ Kittler's example illustrates how texts are the products of many recursions and involve layers of observer effects, a fact that can help us keep our footing when exploring recursively layered texts.

To continue with marshalling our toolkit, then, both discourse networks and recursion have influenced the development of a subfield of media theory addressing cultural techniques. Several critics have provided concise genealogies of the term, so I here focus only on how cultural techniques have been theorised, and how those interpretations can be fruitfully applied to literary texts without doing violence to their theoretical integrity.³⁰ In introducing this term, I follow the impulse to develop Kittler's "residual", if well concealed, humanism, to which the theory of cultural techniques also responds.³¹ Bernhard Siegert cautions against thinking of cultural techniques as an "anthropological turn" in media theory, arguing:

[The concept] is vehemently opposed to any ontological usage of philosophical terms: *Man* does not exist independently of cultural techniques of hominization, *time* ... of cultural techniques for calculating and measuring time; *space* ... of cultural techniques for surveying and administering space; and so on.³²

However, in the round, analysing cultural techniques offers an "escape route" from Kittler's apparent anti-humanism or technodeterminism, allowing more traditional objects and modes of literary analysis to come back into view. As Winthrop-Young notes:

²⁹ Of course, technically, they are all the product of the poet or poets generally known as Homer, and their listeners and readers, but this suspension of disbelief helps illustrate the principle.

³⁰ Winthrop-Young, 'Cultural Techniques: Preliminary Remarks', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 3-19; see also Bernard Dionysus Geoghegan, 'After Kittler: On the Cultural Techniques of Recent German Media Theory', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 66-82 (pp.71-6).

³¹ Having criticised Kittler's anti-humanism in *New Philosophy for New Media* ((Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), pp.47-92), Mark B.N. Hansen now locates a "residual humanism" in Kittler's work as he "cannot cease to see" "'humanism' everywhere in [his] method" ('Symbolizing Time: Kittler and Twenty-First-Century Media', in *Kittler Now*, ed. by Sale and Salisbury, pp.210-37 (p.210)). An example might be Kittler's "naked thesis" that "we knew nothing about our senses until media provided models and metaphors", which does not deny the relevance of human senses, but takes a deep interest in them and so attends to their technical *a priori* (*Optical Media*, p.34).

³² 'Cacography or Communication? Cultural Techniques in German Media Studies', trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Grey Room*, 29 (2007), 26-47 (p.30, original emphasis)

[T]o speak of operations and connections allows those inspired by the Kittler effect to speak of practices without saying society; to readmit human actors allows them to speak of agency without saying subjects; and to speak of recursions allows them to speak of history without implying narratives of continuity or social teleology.³³

The turn towards cultural techniques can thus be seen as a fulfilment, in different form, of the turn that Kittler's post-millennial work took towards "an existential opulence" that might frame the beginning of linear writing in Ancient Greece as "a more upbeat counterpoint" to his earlier work.³⁴ Nevertheless, critics continue to exhibit a preference for programmatic, theoretical studies and a certain skittishness about tackling literature.³⁵ Studies of cultural techniques have instead addressed agricultural techniques like ploughing, the use of doors to produce distinctions such as inside/outside or human/animal, processes such as law making, and acts such as servants' courtly coughing.³⁶ When texts are at issue, studies for the most part avoid literary analysis in favour of thinking broadly about writing and reading.³⁷ Here, I aim to bring cultural techniques to literary studies as a demonstration of their mutual value.

³³ 'Cultural Techniques', p.14

³⁴ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, 'Mythographer of Paradoxes: How Friedrich Kittler's Legacy Matters', *Cultural Inquiry*, 42 (2016), 952-8 (p.957). Indeed, Geoghegan notes a "certain planned obsolescence" in Kittler's "correlating [of] cultural form and historical change with the material specificities of distinct media platforms", suggesting that the turn flows from Kittler as much as representing a turn away from him ('After Kittler', p.68).

³⁵ My précis of the current discourse in German is admittedly partial, as I rely mostly on translated works. This poses a risk of observation bias, but my summary aims to alert English-speaking readers to what they may find on the subject in English.

³⁶ Siegert's *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) details the use of grids to delineate space and of doors to distinguish inside and outside; Cornelia Vismann's 'Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty', trans. by Ilinca Iurascu, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 83-93, addresses the law as a cultural technique, an essay first published as 'Kulturtechniken und Souveränität', *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung*, 1 (2010), 171-81; Markus Krajewski's 'The Power of Small Gestures: On the Cultural Technique of Service', trans. by Charles Marcrum, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 94-109 discusses the fascinating topic of servants' coughs.

³⁷ Two exceptions are Edgar Landgraf's reading of Goethe's poetry, suggesting that the lyric is a cultural technique that "helps redefine how intimacy is communicated" ('Intimacy, Morality, and the Inner Problematic of the Lyric', in *Goethe Yearbook 20*, ed. by Daniel Purdy and Catriona MacLeod (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), pp.5-23 (p.6)), and Verena Lobsien's analysis of the use of "cultural techniques for the management of emotion developed in classical antiquity" in Elizabethan England ("Stewed phrase" and the impassioned imagination in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*', in *Love, history and emotion Chaucer and Shakespeare*, ed. by Andrew James Johnston, Russell West-Pavlov and Elisabeth Kempf (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp.125-40 (p.130)).

In summary, the most influential programmatic descriptions of cultural techniques yield the following definition: cultural techniques comprise recursive chains of operations that take place outside the relationship between the sender and receiver of any act of communication, rather than being directed by either party towards the other, and they both produce culture and assimilate individuals to it.³⁸ Concretely, encountering an art-object is an operation, in the mathematical sense of a process in which something is altered or manipulated according to a set of formal rules. Each operation occurs recursively, so a new encounter begins where the previous one ended, not because an observer so wishes it, but because that is the very nature of the operation's algorithm. In this respect, the cultural technique of encountering an art-object resembles J. Hillis Miller's argument that "reading or looking" "seem to complete a purpose that is not so much that of the writer or painter"—or the reader or looker—"as a need intrinsic to the works themselves".³⁹

By understanding encounter as a cultural technique, and by attending to how encounters and art-objects are depicted in literature, we can follow Cornelia Vismann's advice and "derive the operational script from the resulting operation".⁴⁰ This approach to texts that either ekphrastically invite encounters with art-objects, or depict encounters occurring, will help us to understand what art-objects "complet[ing their] purpose" means and how that "need" functions. This component is largely missing in existing studies of how Victorian media operate. For example, Catherine Maxwell develops a line of thinking similar to Miller's, and to Kittler's emphasis on the self-directed action of media, in *Second Sight*, which addresses the art-object's magnetism.⁴¹ However, while her analysis describes well the subjective experience of encountering an art-object

³⁸ I draw here on the frameworks proposed by Krajewski in 'Small Gestures' (pp.98-9), Siegert in 'Cultural Techniques: Or the End of the Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory', trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 48-65 (pp.58-62), and Sybille Krämer in 'Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques – Moving Beyond Text', trans. by Michael Wutz, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 20-9 (p.27), first published as 'Kultur, Technik, Kulturtechnik: Wider die Diskursivierung der Kultur', in *Bild, Schrift, Zahl*, ed. by Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp (Munich: Fink, 2003), pp.11-22.

³⁹ 'What Do Stories about Pictures Want?', *Critical Inquiry*, 34.2 (2008), 59-97 (p.59)

⁴⁰ 'Sovereignty', p.87

⁴¹ *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)

and being drawn by its magnetism, it does not allow us to get ‘behind the scenes’ and understand the media logic that produces those effects.

The common critical focus on the subjective experience of encountering art-objects illustrates that a cultural technique is at work here, from which we as critics cannot extract ourselves, but of which we must be conscious.⁴² Kittler theorises that “by their nature” media “conceal themselves” in order to make their operations appear natural or inevitable, and on this basis his work suggests that “by relying on concepts such as understanding and subjectivity we are victims of a systematic deception”.⁴³ Studies of cultural techniques make similar claims, often deploying Michel Serres’ notion of the parasite.⁴⁴ As Winthrop-Young notes, “cultural techniques refer to processing operations that frequently coalesce into entities which are subsequently viewed as the agents or sources running these operations”.⁴⁵ As critics, we are vulnerable to the same “deception” as any other subject confronted with the operations of media or cultural techniques.⁴⁶ Their capacity to infiltrate our thinking is strong. So, for example, in describing the attraction of art-objects to us, Valentine Cunningham highlights “the imperative that literature seems to feel to picture such nonverbal items, to incorporate them into text, to have us picture them along with the writer ... and their characters”, an imperative that seems “simply inescapable”,

⁴² In this regard, habits of thought developed through engaging with critical theory are of evident benefit.

⁴³ Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury, ‘Introduction’, in *Kittler Now*, ed. by Sale and Salisbury, pp.xiii-xxxix (p.xxx). In *Optical Media*, Kittler draws on the “postulate of visibility” (Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. by Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), pp.361-75) to suggest that technical media “destroy” that idea that “that which exists also allows itself in principle to be seen”—by concealing themselves (p.39). There seems to me to be no strict reason why we should distinguish technical media from painting, for example, which although apparently transparent visually, holds many secrets in terms of its physical production (the preparation and blending of pigments, for example) and does not reveal visually how it operating on the observer, physically or imaginatively.

⁴⁴ Siegert, in particular, produces an extended reading of cultural techniques in the light of Serres’ concept, in both ‘Cultural Techniques’ and ‘Cacography’, drawing on *The Parasite*, trans. by Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

⁴⁵ ‘Cultural Techniques’, p.11. More generally, the distinction between “media” and “cultural techniques” is sometimes blurred. For example, Siegert defines cultural techniques as “media that process the observation, displacement, and differentiation” of the distinctions that lie at the root of any culture (‘Cacography’, p.31). However, it seems clear that the study of “cultural techniques” looks beyond storage or transmission media to include other material objects and behaviours.

⁴⁶ As Winthrop-Young suggests, there are “the faint outlines of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic” at work here, and we may dwell on the question: “Are we duped by the cunning of our tools?” (‘Cultural Techniques’, p.7).

especially in the light of Cunningham’s repeated use of the metaphor “picture”.⁴⁷ Thinking of encountering art-objects as a cultural technique can help us obtain enough critical distance to understand the underlying structure that gives rise to an “imperative” that infiltrates even our critical metaphors.

It may be productive to dwell momentarily on the case for employing Kittler’s methodology over the tools for thinking about media offered by the Frankfurt School. Kittler’s work might be best characterised as ‘post-Frankfurt School’. As Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury note, having “argu[ed] for the relative autonomy of the technical realm”, Kittler “require[d] a mechanism for historical change” that offered an “alternative to the [Frankfurt School] standard societal dynamics of politics or economics”. In the concept of “strategic escalation”, Kittler found an engine of history distinct from the focus on social change.⁴⁸ He turned away from the form of (self-critical) social critique that characterises the Frankfurt School in favour of critiquing how ‘so-called man’ and ‘so-called society’ are subjected to media, discarding subjectivity and consciousness almost entirely in favour of materialism. As David E. Wellbery summarises, Kittler’s innovation is to “replace the traditional causal-expressive model of sociological explanation with a cybernetic one”, meaning that “there is no longer any totalizing term—say, ‘bourgeois society’—that can serve as an explanans for individual and local cultural phenomena. These are, quite positivistically, what they are: data selected and steered by their commands and addresses”.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that Kittler’s work shares many of the same foundations as the writings of the Frankfurt School, and similarities in their objects of study and conclusions inevitably arise. For example, Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ shares

⁴⁷ ‘Why Ekphrasis?’, *Classical Philology*, 102.1 (2007), 57-71 (p.57)

⁴⁸ ‘Introduction’, p.xxiii. This is not to say that Kittler never attends to economic or political issues, including class. In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), he addresses the role of the typewriter—and the office work that it required—in relation to women’s emergence into the labour market, noting that it was their “marginal position in the power system of script that forced women to develop their manual dexterity” (p.194). Mapping these sociopolitical factors associated with these technological innovations is simply not his primary focus.

⁴⁹ ‘Foreword’, in *Discourse Networks*, pp.vii-xxxiii (p.xviii)

Kittler's interest in epistemic breaks and film as a mass medium,⁵⁰ and Kittler's work on discourse networks bears certain resemblance to Max Horkheimer's focus on historical specificity. Perhaps the closest similarity in terms of the themes explored here is between Kittler's work and the pessimism about human emancipation expressed in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,⁵¹ although Kittler himself was highly critical of that work.⁵²

Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of a culture industry, whereby mass culture in a capitalist society produces standardised cultural goods that effect docility in consumers, certainly seems to inform Kittler's approach to the subject situated within a discourse network, but for him that passivity is both assumed and (morally) irrelevant. He attends not to the position of the subject, but to the self-sustaining operations of the culture industry's products. Kittler would reject both *Dialectic's* attention to the content of media—the “unity of style” that means that “films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art” because “the truth that they are nothing but business” is naked and “used as an ideology to legitimize the trash the intentionally produce”⁵³—and its veiled hope that the action of those in power might effect change.⁵⁴ By contrast, Kittler's media executive is not testing cultural products against himself; he is produced by those cultural products, as all other listeners, viewers and readers are.

This divergence is rooted in Kittler's turn away from many of the theoretical precepts underlying *Dialectic*, and the work of the Frankfurt School generally, such as Marx's fetishism of commodities. Kittler would have us treat media, at least, in direct relation to other media, independent from human interactions that might be said to sustain them, such as manufacturing or design. The use and exchange values of media are thus outwith Kittler's interest in them. Adorno and Horkheimer are deeply troubled by the fact “the

⁵⁰ in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968; repr. 2007), pp.217-52

⁵¹ trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002)

⁵² See ‘Copyright 1944 by Social Studies Association, Inc.’, in *Flaschenpost und Postkarte Korrespondenzen zwischen Kritischer Theorie und Poststrukturalismus*, ed. by Sigrid Weigel (Cologne: Böhlau, 1995), pp.185-93

⁵³ *Dialectic*, p.103, p.95

⁵⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer propose that “the agreement, or at least the common determination, of the executive powers to produce or let pass nothing which does not conform to their tables, to their concept of the consumer, or, above all, to themselves”. Within that pessimism is the veiled potential for optimism pinned upon the executive who might say “no”, and champion that which does not conform (p.96)

spectator must need no thoughts of his own” because “the product prescribes each reaction, not through any actual coherence—which collapses once exposed to thought—but through signals. Any logical connection presupposing mental capacity is scrupulously avoided”.⁵⁵ Kittler attends to these signals, accepting the unnecessary nature of subjective intervention as a bare fact of our media situation.

In following Kittler’s approach, I do not wish to suggest that the theoretical frameworks of the critics who preceded him have lost their usefulness, particularly on a political level. On a technical level, however, in examining the operation of art-objects within texts, Kittler demands our focus on those art-objects themselves, viewing them as agents rather than as tools. Although much productive work could be done in drawing Kittler’s perspectives together with the work of critics associated with the Frankfurt School, then, in this analysis I generally forego drawing such analogies or contrasts in favour of allowing Kittler’s theories the fuller rein that critical theory has so often enjoyed in literary criticism. I see this as the first step towards evaluating critically their respective, and perhaps mutually enriching, contributions to our methods.

Discourse network 1890

The Kittlerian toolkit that I describe can be applied to a range of time periods, national traditions, and types of cultural artefacts. Here, I focus on four writers within the British discourse network 1890, exploring their interpretations of the cultural technique of encountering an art-object with a view to identifying an operational script for each one that reflects a form of resistance on the part of old media. For each text, I ask what type of encounter takes place and explore what an art-object completing its purpose looks like in that context. In summary, to Michael Field an art-object completing its purpose through encounter means producing a definitive verbal representation of its song. To Rossetti, it means provoking a new meaning through the observer effect, continuing the recursive chain that leads back to it. To Lee, it means controlling its own future meanings and manifesting itself in haunting physical presences

⁵⁵ p.109

by invading the subject's mind. Finally, to Wilde, the art-object completing its purpose means taking control of the observer effect and invading the subject's mind in a way that controls their very sense of self.

While attempting to create enough critical distance that we may identify these operations of media and begin to derive some rules regarding how the cultural technique of encounter operates in each case, I must also diverge a little from Kittler's "post-hermeneutic" approach in focusing on both the subject—the observer—and meanings, as suggested by my description of the observer effect.⁵⁶ All literary criticism is hermeneutical, seeking to interpret and make meaning, and that is true here as elsewhere. In order to address meanings, it becomes also necessary to address content. While Kittler might have found such criticism naïve, I nevertheless take heart from his description—not without affection—of "readers addicted to decoding", which literary scholars most certainly are.⁵⁷ Texts demand to be read, and if we are to undertake "decoding", then literary content is as good a place to start as any. As Winthrop-Young argues, "if you know Kittler well, you can work with him against him", and I propose to employ Kittler's media history accordingly.⁵⁸

With this in mind, let us consider the context of the texts to be decoded in search of operational scripts. That the observer effect relies on past meanings, on recursions in a chain, highlights the importance of our understanding as best we can the discourse network in which it occurs, and the Western *fin de siècle*, which I shorthand here as 'discourse network 1890', has many particularities. It is the business of historians, and other humanities scholars taking a historicist approach, to tease out each of these, and to provide a comprehensive summary of discourse network 1890 would be impossible. It was a period of New Women and New Imperialism, witnessed the birth of terrorist bombings as a political phenomenon, the start of commercial production of automobiles, the discovery of x-rays, and the first modern Olympic games. In what follows, I highlight only a set of the features of discourse network 1890's technologies and institutions that are most relevant to our focus of analysis.

⁵⁶ Winthrop-Young, 'Cultural Techniques', p.15

⁵⁷ *Discourse Networks*, p.287

⁵⁸ *Kittler and the Media*, p.11

Kittler presents 1880 as a pivotal moment ahead of the epistemic break between discourse network 1800, which is characterised by the monopoly of literature as a medium, and that of 1900, characterised by the emergence of separate channels for sound (the gramophone), writing (the typewriter), and images (film).⁵⁹ He argues that “after 1880 we find ourselves in an empire of standards” dictated by technical media, such as photography, film, and sound recording, these technologies coming to alter artistic production and aesthetic experience alike.⁶⁰ Kittler has at times been (fairly) criticised for an “epochist way of thinking about technology” and a sweeping historicism.⁶¹ Although in this thesis I seek to examine a sort of “historical syncopation” that has been found lacking in Kittler’s work by exploring the continued relevance and resistance of traditional media in discourse network 1890,⁶² I find his reading of the late-nineteenth century to be detailed, well informed, and persuasive, even in its polemicism.⁶³ He describes the shift around 1880 as having a particularly important impact on literature, which in his media history often acts as a litmus test because it “change[s] historically according to the material and technical resources at its disposal”.⁶⁴ So, for example, the art market expanded rapidly during the final two decades of the nineteenth century, with a concomitant

⁵⁹ I note how the edited collection, *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century: Image, Sound, Touch Media*, ed. by Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011) mimics this division but replaces literature (writing) with touch, perhaps reflecting the influence of affect theory on Victorian studies.

⁶⁰ *Optical Media*, p.37. In *Discourse Networks*, 1800 and 1900 are emblematic dates, but Kittler’s analyses operate within 30-year spans around them (see, for example, p.370).

⁶¹ Steven Connor, ‘Modernism and the Writing Hand’, <<http://stevenconnor.com/modhand.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017], para.22. ‘Epochism’ is a criticism often levelled at theories about media and technology, as in Evgeny Morozov’s *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, solutionism and the urge to fix problems that don’t exist* (London: Penguin, 2013). Unsurprisingly, Michel Foucault and visual culture theorists such as Crary have also been criticised for using selective historical evidence “as a canvas upon which to project theoretical formulations and schemes derived from the present” (Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), p.17, citing Lisa Gitelman’s *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), and Geoffrey Batchen’s 1991 review of Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer* (‘Seeing Things: Vision and Modernity’, *Afterimage*, 19.2 (1991), 5-7).

⁶² Steven Connor, ‘*Scilicet*: Kittler, Media and Madness’, in *Kittler Now*, ed. by Sale and Salisbury, pp.115-31 (p.128)

⁶³ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht defends Kittler’s approach more broadly, framing him as a “mythographer” whose “works never provide answers or solutions but bring to the fore contours of a complex world”, which “may enable us to work through our most pressing challenges and hopes” (‘Legacy’, pp.957-8).

⁶⁴ Wellbery, ‘Foreword’, p.xiii

increase in the illustrated press, art periodicals, and published art criticism.⁶⁵ Different forms of intercourse between text and art-object arose, allowing different thoughts about art-objects to become thinkable, and so printable. Kittler argues that, in the final two decades of the nineteenth century, “against the backdrop of photography”, literature “no longer simply produce[d] inner pictures” for silent readers, but “beg[an] to create objective and consistent visual leitmotifs that could later easily be filmed”.⁶⁶ Thus, he proposes that literature came to occupy “the margin left to it” as “illustrations outgrew their baby shoes, their contributory role, and learned to walk and wield power”.⁶⁷ This new accommodation by one technology (literature) of another (technically produced images) forms part of what Crary has identified as a “generalized crisis in perception” in discourse network 1890, a crisis he notes as originating in these “new technological forms of spectacle, display, project”.⁶⁸

Kittler cites in support of his theory Guillaume Apollinaire’s defence of his early-twentieth-century *Calligrammes* as both fighting back from “the margin” and accepting a place there:

[I]t would have been strange if in an epoch when the popular art par excellence, the cinema, is a book of pictures, poets had not tried to compose pictures for meditative and refined minds that are not content with the crude imaginings of the makers of films. These last will become more perceptive, and one can predict the day when, the photograph and the cinema having become the only form of publication in use, the poet will have a freedom heretofore unknown. One should not be

⁶⁵ Studies such as Catherine Delyfer’s *Art and Womanhood in Fin-de-Siècle Writing: The Fiction of Lucas Malet, 1880-1931* (London: Routledge, 2011) examine these changes in detail.

⁶⁶ *Optical Media*, p.139. Although Kelvin and Mary Patricia Kane (*Spurious Ghosts: The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee* (Rome: Carocci, 2006)) highlight the aesthetic and class preferences for painted portraits, it is worth noting here that ekphrasis did not eschew photography as a subject. As John Hollander notes in *The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), although ekphrases of photographs only emerged in the late-nineteenth century, “the particular aura of the daguerreotype—with its highly reflective surface and somewhat fleeting image—is a special instance”. Nevertheless, “poetic readings of photographs” raise different questions to ekphrases of paintings and are beyond the scope of this work (p.67).

⁶⁷ *Discourse Networks*, p.250. Kittler’s interest is in “the caesuras or breaks in perception and artistic practices ... necessary in order to reach the threshold of moving pictures” in 1895, and the “problem of moving pictures” and of “image transmission” (*Optical Media*, pp.48-9).

⁶⁸ *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p.2

astonished if, with the means they now have at their disposal, poets set themselves to preparing this new art.⁶⁹

With the benefit of hindsight, almost two decades into the twentieth century, Apollinaire articulates ideas and feelings that are, I argue, rooted in discourse network 1890, and its texts. He acknowledges a continuing diminution of literature's status—film is the art-form *par excellence*; it and photography are predicted to attain total domination—but also asserts the continued aesthetic value of old forms, with poetry remaining attractive to “refined minds” and set to become increasingly free, a “new art”.⁷⁰ There is a tension between a clear-sighted assessment of the rise of new media in discourse network 1900, such as we might see in literary texts that begin to demonstrate “visual leitmotifs” ready for filming, and a belief in the continued role of old media, which direct themselves towards silent readers—“*camera obscura[s]*” capable of producing internal images from a written source—who, we can deduce, form the “meditative and refined minds” of Apollinaire's imagined audience.⁷¹ While Apollinaire refers to literature, similar claims could be made for other forms of old media, such as painting.⁷²

Discourse network 1890 can thus be characterised first by significant changes in the medial environment, and secondly by a stubborn persistence of traditional art forms. So, for example, Mary Patricia Kane's examination of Lee's supernatural fiction highlights the continued relevance of portraiture in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, as it “satisfied a need to establish some degree of

⁶⁹ *Discourse Networks*, pp.250-1, citing “Apollinaire, p.228”. However, *Discourse Networks'* Works Cited list does not include any works by Apollinaire. The original *Aufschreibesystem 1800/1900* (Munich: Fink, 1985) cites a French typescript of *Calligrammes*. I believe the citation in *Discourse Networks* derives from *Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire*, trans. by Roger Shattuck (New York: New Directions Books, 1971), where this passage appears on page 228. However, Shattuck's translation of Apollinaire's French differs from the translation in *Discourse Networks*, most notably in the final sentence. Shattuck's reads: “One should not be astonished if, with only the means they have now at their disposal, they set themselves to preparing this new art”. The “only” is a more literal translation of Apollinaire's “*Qu'on ne s'étonne point si, avec les seuls moyens dont ils disposent encore, ils s'efforcent de se préparer à cet art nouveau*” (as quoted in *Aufschreibesystem*, p.317). In both, the implication is clear, however: a new discourse network, replete with walking illustrations, offers the poet fresh tools.

⁷⁰ There is a certain contiguity here with the thinking of many nineteenth-century aesthetes, including the poetic projects of Michael Field and Rossetti.

⁷¹ Kittler, *Optical Media*, p.139. The production of images from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, for example, through photography by Julia Margaret Cameron can be distinguished from the much earlier Pre-Raphaelite paintings of scenes from that same text.

⁷² Lynda Nead explores this issue in *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography and Film c. 1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

stability in a culture suffering from an overwhelming sensation of instability”. Kane argues that, by the 1890s, “few of the certainties with which the century had begun were left standing, so the image of an essential identity captured on canvas exerted a forceful appeal”.⁷³ We might link this to a development from the very beginning of discourse network 1800, which Richard Terdiman describes as a “memory crisis”: an “insecurity” about “culture’s involvement with its past” and a “perturbation of the link” that people had “with their own inheritance”, deriving from the French Revolution.⁷⁴ Across the generations of the nineteenth century, then, the “sense that [the] past had somehow evaded memory, that recollection ha[d] ceased to integrate with consciousness” would only have escalated, and the *fin de siècle* would have been “framed by a disciplined obsession with the past”.⁷⁵

The stubborn persistence of old media into—and beyond—discourse network 1890 was accompanied by an increasing suspicion about the tractability of such art-objects to observations that produce stable interpretations of them.⁷⁶ As Renate Brosch highlights in her analysis of female portraits, mid-to-late-nineteenth-century observers developed a “resistance to absorption by the referential content of an art work”, a desire to retain a critical distance from art-objects,⁷⁷ and Stefano Evangelista notes a shift in art appreciation from perceiving art-objects as having inherent qualities to focusing instead on “the act of reception”.⁷⁸ This can be linked to a growing awareness that “between retina and world is a screen of signs”,⁷⁹ which Hilary Fraser links to key changes in discourse network 1890’s institutions, “not least” “the cumulative and canon-forming judgements of Art History, and the construction of galleries

⁷³ *Spurious Ghosts*, p.22; see also Kelvin’s ‘Painting as Physical Object’

⁷⁴ *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp.3-4

⁷⁵ p.24, p.4

⁷⁶ See also Kate Flint’s *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), which focuses on the “destabilise[d] confidence in the equilibrium of the visual world” in the nineteenth century (p.37).

⁷⁷ ‘Looking at Women Looking: Female Portraits in the Gender Crisis’, *Gender Forum*, 13 (2006), 1-9, <<http://genderforum.org/imagendering-ii-issue-13-2006/>> [accessed 17 March 2017], p.9. As mentioned, readings of this period, following Regenia Gagnier’s *Idylls*, highlight the “social tensions” between classes that had been “brewing for decades” by the 1890s (p.51). Kane and Brosch are no exception, and both focus in particular on the Victorian middle class.

⁷⁸ ‘Vernon Lee in the Vatican’, p.31

⁷⁹ Norman Bryson, ‘The Gaze in the Expanded Field’, in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. by Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), pp.87-113 (p.91)

and exhibition spaces that conspire to decontextualise and remove the image from the ‘world’”.⁸⁰

Such changes gave rise to “a fundamental uncertainty concerning observable reality”, which “produced proliferating relativist viewpoints”,⁸¹ with Walter Pater’s subjectivist question, “What is this song or picture ... to me?”, but one such example.⁸² This new position of the observer means that the observer effect has a particular prominence during discourse network 1890. This is true also of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s interpretation of *Stimmung*, or pervasive mood, which attains a particular character in discourse network 1890.⁸³ Gumbrecht agrees with Kittler that the end of the nineteenth century was “a time whose complexity seemed to escape, more and more, traditional forms of literature and art”, and he thus concludes that it was a moment at which *Stimmung* “achieved condensed and intensified form”, with an increased “desire for individual points of access to harmony” that echoes the quest for stability identified by Kane.⁸⁴ We may say, then, that the conditions of uncertainty in discourse network 1890 became so dominant that they pervaded texts about art-objects as a *Stimmung*.

For such moods to become so pervasive that they are “articulated in texts other than on the level of representation” there must be a “requisite density of feeling” that amounts to “forms and tones” becoming “‘charged’, as if by electricity”. Thus, wherever we detect a *Stimmung* that has penetrated a text, Gumbrecht argues, “we may assume that a primary experience has occurred to the point of becoming a preconscious reflex”.⁸⁵ For example, an atmosphere of suspicion about art-objects’ meanings and intentions, such as we can identify in Lee’s supernatural stories, emerges from a discourse network where such

⁸⁰ ‘A Visual Field: Michael Field and the Gaze’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34 (2006), pp.553-71 (pp.555-6)

⁸¹ Brosch, ‘Looking at Women Looking’, p.6

⁸² *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. by Donald L. Hill (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p.xx

⁸³ *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.5. Originally published as *Stimmungen Lesen* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2011). Wellbery explores the nature and history of *Stimmung* as a concept in ‘Stimmung’, in *Historisches Wörterbuch ästhetischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 5, *Postmoderne – Synästhesie*, ed. by Karlheinz Barck et al. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), p.703.

⁸⁴ *Stimmung*, p.11

⁸⁵ p.19

suspicions abound, to the point where “habitualization” has occurred. Identifying these sorts of primary experiences is one way in which we, as inhabitants of a wholly different medial situation, can seek to construct an understanding of a discourse network that is not our own.⁸⁶

Alongside medial changes, medial persistence, and uncertainty about the interpretability of art-objects, one final primary experience that is particularly relevant to this study is the emergence of ‘noise’ in discourse network 1890, particularly through the technical medium of photography. Generally defined as the opposite of information, or unwanted data, noise in the form of unwanted, unintended, or unexpected visual information is most threateningly manifested in portrait photography, which as Kittler describes, “destroys precisely the ‘ideal’ or imaginary, which sculptors or painters reproduced again and again when they dutifully ‘deified’ their models”.⁸⁷ John Hollander summarises it memorably thus: “a successful portrait climaxes a problematic quest; a successful photographic one is the result of a kill”.⁸⁸ In discourse network 1890, photography “manifests for the first time something real that makes even the noblest daughter suddenly look like an ex-con”, an unwanted effect that, as Kittler’s formulation suggests, renders the manifested visual data noise about the subject.⁸⁹ The invasion of technically produced images by unwanted information, often manipulated (and thus made all the more visible) in genres such as the hidden mother photograph, is a clear instance of a primary

⁸⁶ That a ‘meeting of minds’ across different medial situations is impossible is an idea common to both contemporary and nineteenth-century critics. For example, Pater makes clear that we cannot experience art-objects in the same way as the initial viewers or, indeed, the creators, and Carolyn Williams has shown that Pater’s aesthetic historicism is based on a scepticism towards the idea of any historical revival or recovery (*Transfigured World: Walter Pater’s Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.5)

⁸⁷ *Optical Media*, p.144. Here Kittler issues what, in the light of his later work on recursion, appears to be a methodological challenge: can portrait photography form part of a recursive chain alongside sculpture and painting, when the ‘ideal’ of the latter media is “destroyed” by the former? There is not space here to explore this question, but it is one which seems to me to invite a theoretically informed analysis of the interrelations between those media.

⁸⁸ This, he reasons, is because painted portraits are “generated in a complex set of imaginative revisions, associations, and transformations of an encounter, *dal vero*, between sitter and painter”, producing “a kind of essence”, whereas “whatever essentiality is ... revealed” in photographs satisfy “post-Paterian modernist sensibilit[ies that] sanctif[y] the momentary” (*Gazer’s Spirit*, p.67).

⁸⁹ Kittler, *Optical Media*, p.144. This is a facet, too, of the gramophone in treating auditory signals, “empt[ying] out words, by bypassing their imaginary aspect (signified) for their real aspects (the physiology of the voice)” (*Discourse Networks*, p.246). Technical media of all types absorb, store, and transmit noise as much as information.

experience produced by media that fed the generalised late-nineteenth-century anxiety about noise as the emergence of formerly repressed behaviours, thoughts, or feelings, the intrusion upon consciousness of that which was neither intended nor wanted. Elana Gomel notes how, in this period, uncertainty applied also to the subject: “the soul, or the psyche, became splintered and mobile”, but as a result of this mobile personality, “the body acquired an uncanny and stubborn agency” and often seemed to conspire to reveal the noise of that split psyche, dramatised at its extreme in *Dorian Gray*.⁹⁰

The common fact of such noise in part underpins the enthusiasm for old media noted by Kane and Kelvin, but the promise of expensive oil portraits to grant greater control to those who wished to avoid displaying the noise of themselves is undermined by the generalised awareness of noise as part of the self. Escape has become impossible. So, for example, in Lee’s ‘Oke of Okehurst’, William Oke’s enthusiasm for the portrait-painting project, in contrast to his wife’s indifference, reflects his anxiety about the noise about himself, his wife, and his family, leading Andrew Eastham to characterise William as a hysteric and Alice a historicist.⁹¹ The fact or risk of noise in portraits has permeated Lee’s story as a *Stimmung* that affects characters and readers alike.

Ekphrasis and noise

Noise is but one of the many features of media that have come to inform our subjective understanding of ourselves, according to Kittler’s “naked thesis” that “we knew nothing about our senses until media provided models and metaphors”.⁹² Noise is not merely a function of technical media such as the photograph, however. It is also a component of old media that is particularly relevant to the genre of ekphrasis. Noise constitutes a key part of media theory thanks to the influence of Claude Shannon’s work in information theory on a

⁹⁰ ‘Oscar Wilde, “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” and the (Un)death of the Author’, *Narrative*, 12.1 (2004), 74-92, p.82

⁹¹ *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.59, p.54

⁹² *Optical Media*, p.34

range of critics, including Kittler.⁹³ Wellbery defines literature as the “product of a selection and rarefaction”, a range of discriminations between data that is included (information) and that which is excluded (noise).⁹⁴ This relationship between information and noise in a medium becomes additionally complicated where one type of information is transformed into another, as in ekphrasis, which we might call a technography, “a writing out of an operation that consists in that very writing”.⁹⁵

For Kittler, an art-object “cannot be translated” into a text because media are invariable: “a medium is a medium is a medium”. However, it *is* possible to “transfer messages from one medium to another”, which “always involves reshaping them to conform to new standards and materials”. Thus, although critics often use the metaphor of translation,⁹⁶ ekphrasis is better seen as a method of “transposition” that “is accomplished serially, at discrete points”, ideally “reproducing the internal (syntagmatic and paradigmatic) relations between [the original medium’s] elements” within the new medium. Thus, “every transposition is to a degree arbitrary, a manipulation” or operation, leaving “gaps”.⁹⁷ I quote extensively here because this is the most precise and technical description that could be offered of the discriminations between “information” and “noise” that are required in order to complete an ekphrasis. Kittler’s formulation emphasises the transpositions that visual information—a painting’s dimensions, the colour of the background, etc.—must undergo in order to become verbal information, and how these operations form a fundamental part of the technography that is ekphrastic writing.

⁹³ See, in particular, ‘A Mathematical Theory of Communication’, in *Collected Papers*, ed. by N.J.A. Sloan and Aaron D. Wyner (Piscataway: IEEE Press, 1993)

⁹⁴ ‘Foreword’, p.xiv. The distinction between literary information and literary noise is “historically variable” (*ibid*). For example, the visual leitmotifs that Kittler identifies in literature of the age of film would have amounted to noise in earlier texts, as the possibility of being filmed was unknown.

⁹⁵ Connor, ‘Writing Machines’, p.2

⁹⁶ Mathematical definitions may serve as useful reference points with which to disentangle our metaphors. In topography, translation is the movement of a body from one point in space to another, such that every point moves in the same direction and over the same distance, without any rotation, reflection, enlargement, or shrinking. Transformation is the process by which a figure may be altered, such as in a rotation or an enlargement. Transposition too involves an alteration, but it is an alteration required as part of a transfer of something to a different place or context, such as transferring a term from one side of an algebraic equation to another, with a change of sign accordingly.

⁹⁷ *Discourse Networks*, p.265

In some ways, then, ekphrasis in discourse network 1890 might seem to offer a corrective to the invasion of noise in visual representation via technical media, allowing an authorial intervention that could have a stabilising effect, resisting the “background of white noise” against which discourse network 1900 “place[d] all discourse”.⁹⁸ However, this is no more the case for ekphrasis than for oil portraits. The internal relations of an art-object cannot be perfectly reproduced. The “gaps” left by transposition are channels through which noise and instability inevitably penetrate as if by osmosis. As Cunningham describes, ekphrasis’ failure fully to “presence” an art-object “prompts”, apparently without human intervention, “responses”, further recursions, the reapplication of the same procedure to successive intermediary results.⁹⁹

This weakness of ekphrasis is commonly recognised in literary studies as a form of ‘bad faith’, a medial deception of the subject.¹⁰⁰ Kittler’s formulation allows us to understand why it occurs, not only because of the physical impossibility of ‘presencing’ an art-object through a text, but also because there are always “gaps” between discrete data points, which can be filled through the observer effect. It is the fact of these gaps—and the hope of possibly filling them—that “prompts” further “responses”, as though adding one more piece of information might finally “presence” the art-object after all. That these gaps *are* filled, albeit partially, is reflected in the recursive chains that link representations of, for example, the Sirens across thousands of years of Western history. Thinking back to Kittler’s example of the Sirens, wherein Odysseus’ recursion and observer effect is predicated upon the recursion of the Sirens, we could say that the Sirens undertake the transposition of Homer’s epic into song, and Odysseus’ observer effect takes place within the discrete gaps left to him after he has grasped that prior meaning, which is always partial.

Understanding the method of transposition, then, allows us to highlight the chain of operations involved in the cultural technique of encounter, from the

⁹⁸ *ibid*, p.288

⁹⁹ ‘Why Ekphrasis?’, p.71

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Cunningham’s description of ekphrasis as “know[ing] from the start” that “all the objects of the ekphrastic gaze are made ones”, but seeking to conceal that artifice from the reader (p.68), or Peter Barry’s suggestion that ekphrastic poetry, often opening with an “apparently straight description of the visual image”, institutes an “implicit” and always broken “compact” with the reader that this time, at least, there will be no tricks with the real” (‘Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis’, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 31.2 (2002), 155-65 (p.160)).

prior recursion that forms its start through to the intermediate result that forms its end. Far from a slow attenuation through successive transpositions with the data of the 'original' becoming whittled down to nothing, we see a continued fertility of the trope, which in the case of ekphrasis we might see as part of the "delight in the *interference* ... between letter and image".¹⁰¹ Such interference is part and parcel of the observer effect, that simultaneous vision of past image, present text, and future meaning. In this way, the observer effect resists Kittler's claim that "once memories and dreams, the dead and ghosts, become technically reproducible, readers and writers no longer need the powers of hallucination", both visual and auditory, that came with silent reading.¹⁰²

Overview

The first two chapters of this study consider the gaps—deliberate or not—in authors' ekphrastic transpositions that act as a starting point for the observer effect. The lyric poems of Michael Field and Rossetti, written either before the subject painting, or with a view of it in their mind's eye, position us as primary observers encountering an art-object through ekphrasis. The ekphrastic poem is not only the written result of their encounter and observer effect, but also the tool by which we may encounter the art-object and continue the recursive chain of meanings.

Although Rossetti's *Ballads* was the first to be written and published, I begin by analysing Michael Field's *Sight and Song* because its status as a wholly ekphrastic volume allows us more easily to theorise some of the issues at hand. I suggest that Michael Field's stated objectivist project reflects what W.J.T. Mitchell describes as ekphrastic hope. In a tripartite model, Mitchell provides a detailed analysis of how ekphrasis tricks the reader into momentarily believing that they may have a wholly 'real' encounter with an art-object via ekphrasis, that the transposition has not left gaps but has in fact perfectly reproduced the data and internal relations of the art-object in the text. Beginning with ekphrastic

¹⁰¹ Mary Ann Caws, 'Looking: Literature's Other', *PMLA*, 119.5 (2004), 1293-314 (p.1303), original emphasis

¹⁰² *Gramophone*, p.10. In 'Scilicet', Connor examines some of the inconsistencies in Kittler's treatment of the voice in discourse networks 1800 and 1900, which there is not space to explore here.

indifference, “a commonsense perception” that the promised presencing of the art-object is “impossible”, indifference begins to be “overcome in imagination or metaphor” so that language seems “at the service of vision”, producing ekphrastic hope.¹⁰³ Finally, however, hope gives way to ekphrastic fear “that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse”, prompting us to wish “to regulate the borders” between the verbal and the visual again.¹⁰⁴ In proposing to avoid the fall into ekphrastic fear, Michael Field’s volume claims to close the door on recursion and the observer effect as an act once and finally completed, instead setting forth the results of their own encounters as objective examples to be learnt from.

I thus read Michael Field’s volume as didactic. Working with their diaries and letters,¹⁰⁵ I interpret *Sight and Song* as making this impossible claim as an act of resistance against the dominance of men in art criticism. For Michael Field, successfully enacting the cultural technique of encountering art-objects functioned precisely to construct an ‘in group’ of the aesthetically minded, revealed in their relationships with art critics such as John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Bernard Berenson. That cultural techniques are a method of acculturation is etymologically implicit. Wolfgang Ernst suggests that foundational cultural techniques like reading, writing, and representing “generate culture as a

¹⁰³ Arguably, Pater—and other aesthetes—habitually dwelled in this state, as when he argues that “each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what German critics term *Andersstreben*—a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able ... reciprocally to lend each other new forces” (*Renaissance*, p.105). Anna Maria Jones provides an interesting analysis of Pater’s appropriation here of Baudelaire in ‘On the Publication of *Dark Blue*, 1871-73’, *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga, <http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=anna-maria-jones-on-the-publication-of-dark-blue-1871-73> [accessed 17 March 2017].

¹⁰⁴ *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.152-4

¹⁰⁵ The lack of an authoritative critical biography means that critics must still turn directly to these primary sources to attempt to grasp Bradley and Cooper’s attitudes and situation within discourse network 1890. Mary Sturgeon’s *Michael Field* (London: George G. Harrap, 1922) remains informative today, as does *Works and Days: from the journal of Michael Field*, ed. by Thomas Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933). Although Ursula Bridge undertook the task of preparing a full-length critical biography, it remained incomplete and unpublished when she died in 1971. Emma Donoghue’s *We Are Michael Field* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1998), although fascinating, seeks to give an impression of the two women that is inevitably partial, and is not supported by a robust critical framework. Although Rachel Morley conducted work on a possible biography, no formal biography has yet been forthcoming, and she wrote about the challenges of the work in ‘Constructing the Self, Composing the Other: Auto/Fixation and the Case of Michael Field’, *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique*, 8 (2004), no pagination, <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/colloquy/download/colloquy_issue_eight_/morley.pdf> [accessed 17 March 2017].

recurring and normative formation”.¹⁰⁶ As with Kittler’s proclamation that “media determine our situation”, cultural techniques create that which appears to be a prerequisite for their existence.¹⁰⁷ So, a cultural technique of encountering an art-object in a particular way might, ‘catching on’, give rise to a school of art appreciation that appears to dictate that particular mode of encounter from first principles, obscuring cause and effect. *Sight and Song* attempts to set out a new, pedagogic mode of encountering art-objects through their ekphrases that privileges their own methods and interpretations. This method of resistance gives rise to a *Stimmung* of fixity in the volume that, counter-intuitively, risks reducing Michael Field’s authority, as it suggests a wilful misunderstanding of the cultural technique of encounter.

The second chapter turns to Rossetti’s ekphrastic work, which takes a different approach, demanding that the observer does imaginative work in order to have an observer effect following Rossetti’s own recursion to an art-object. I examine a set of Rossetti’s ekphrastic poems from *Ballads* to show how they deliberately occupy an intermediate position in a recursive chain of encountering art-objects, advertising gaps in their transpositions in order to invite further recursions. Like Michael Field, Rossetti had a particular poetic project in mind, and I develop Elizabeth Helsinger’s suggestion that Rossetti sought to renew poetry through paintings and drawings by examining the limits that his ekphrastic poems set on the control of either the artist or author on how an observer encounters the art-object, instead situating the power of art in the cultural technique of encounter itself. Rossetti’s ekphrases use what Miller calls a “divided moment” to confront the observer with a recursion to a trope or specific art-object that is offered not as a *fait accompli* but as a provocative point of departure.¹⁰⁸ His poems’ transpositions of art-objects’ visual data demand the observer’s visionary engagement in order to complete an observer effect.

¹⁰⁶ ‘From Media History of *Zeitkritik*’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 30.6 (2013), 132-46 (p.135). The article was originally published as ‘Von der Mediengeschichte zur Zeitkritik’, in *Kulturgeschichte als Mediengeschichte (oder vice versa?)*, ed. by Lorenz Engell, Bernhard Siegert, and Joseph Vogl (Weibar: Universitätsverlag, 2006), pp.23-32.

¹⁰⁷ *Gramophone*, p.xxxix

¹⁰⁸ ‘The Mirror’s Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Double Work of Art’, *Victorian Poetry*, 29.4 (1991), 333-349 (p.337)

Unlike Michael Field, Rossetti does not propose an explicit physical mode of encountering art-objects. Instead, he relies on the nature of poetry as a phenomenon that alternately relies on the physical effect of “the sound of the voice seeking embodiment” and the “significance of the poetic images”, which “belong to different orders of reality”, to invite us to do our own imaginary work, as we can only “do justice” to his poems—and produce our own observer effect—when we “refuse to let the rhythms they provide carry us along”, physically resisting their music.¹⁰⁹

Rossetti’s poetry thus argues for a still-fertile interrelationship between literature and painting that could produce meaningful aesthetic effects in discourse network 1890. As Winthrop-Young argues, drawing on Michael Wutz’s study *Enduring Words*, “literary texts in analog and digital media ecologies are a great deal more flexible, resourceful and enduring than” Kittler strictly allows, and *Ballads’* ekphrastic poems emphasise these three characteristics persuasively and insistently.¹¹⁰ Kittler’s off-hand remark that *fin-de-siècle* poets “competed with the technological medium of film, whereas it would have seemed sufficient to distinguish letters and books from traditional painting” misses the fact that letters and traditional painting could be allies, and Rossetti’s ekphrastic poetry demonstrates one of the ways that this was possible.¹¹¹

In the final two chapters, media fight back against the subject’s efforts to produce future meanings through an observer effect. Leaving behind the primary observers of lyric poetry, I turn to prose fiction that positions the reader as a second-order observer, observing the cultural technique of encounter through the actions of a character. Lee’s short stories and Wilde’s novel are texts about the functioning of art-objects. While containing ekphrases, these prose texts extend far beyond the genre, and as such we may not only observe ‘technique’—the action performed when encountering an art-object—but also consider more closely the facts of the object itself. In these texts, we come

¹⁰⁹ Gumbrecht, *Stimmung*, pp.47-8

¹¹⁰ Kittler and the Media, p.11; *Enduring Words: Literary Narrative in a Changing Media Ecology* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009)

¹¹¹ *Discourse Networks*, p.251, speaking in particular about Apollinaire and Stéphane Mallarmé.

across encounters that are decentred, mere facts of life that, nevertheless, have both vital and fatal consequences for the observers involved.

Gumbrecht notes that cultural artefacts such as “paintings, songs, conventions of design, and symphonies can all absorb atmospheres and moods and later offer them up for experience in a new present”.¹¹² As second-order observers, we are able to detect this releasing of *Stimmung* and its effects on the primary observers within the text. In this way, both texts demonstrate Wilde’s argument that “art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood”, but trouble his claim that it is thus “not meant to ... influence action in any way”.¹¹³ In fact, both texts demonstrate the influence of art-objects and what Kittler describes as their “commands”, which they transmit to observers, who become mere “addresses” for those instructions.¹¹⁴

These texts also ask us to consider the “physical dimension of phenomena” that contribute to the shared *Stimmung* that art-objects pose a threat to the subject. In examining these effects of art-objects, I link our understanding of cultural techniques as occurrences in interaction with things-in-the-world with Gumbrecht’s theory of presence, wherein he argues that “aesthetic experience” is a “tension-filled simultaneity of effects of meaning”—our hermeneutical thinking—“and effects of presence”, while “everyday experience” registers only the former.¹¹⁵ In cases of ekphrasis, our aesthetic experience relies on an imagined effect of presence, predicated upon prior “in-the-world” experiences with art-objects and reflected in the reliance of the literature on ekphrasis on the metaphor of “presencing” art-objects. Through the prose fiction of Lee and Wilde, however, we attend not only to our own imaginary encounters with art-objects but also to characters’ ‘real’ encounters

¹¹² *Stimmung*, p.16

¹¹³ Wilde expressed this conviction in an 1891 letter to Bernulf Clegg (New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, MA 7258.10 <<http://www.themorgan.org/collection/oscar-wilde/manuscripts-letters/36>> [accessed 17 March 2017]).

¹¹⁴ ‘Geschichte der Kommunikationsmedien’, in *Raum und Verfahren*, ed. Jörg Huber and Alois-Martin Müller (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1993), p.170, translated and cited with the German references in Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, ‘Silicon Sociology, or, Two Kings on Hegel’s Throne? Kittler, Luhmann and the Posthuman Merger of German Media Theory’, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13.2 (2000), 391-420 (p.409).

¹¹⁵ *Stimmung*, p.7, original emphasis. Gumbrecht suggests that while our relationships with things, such as art-objects, appear to have “the ascription of meaning” at their crux, those things always “stand in a necessary relationship to our bodies” (p.6). This echoes the focus of Krajewski, Krämer and others on the tools or objects that form a crucial part of any cultural technique.

thereof. Lee's haunted observers are overcome with effects of presence and lose control over effects of meaning, while Wilde's jealous observers defer hermeneutical thinking, which becomes the preserve of the art-object along with effects of presence.

In these works, the "in-the-world"-ness of art-objects is brought into focus, showing how art-objects can resist or, we might say, object to, human intervention in ways that highlight either their materiality and historicity, or their autonomy from and control over subjects.¹¹⁶ Cultural techniques are particularly involved in how objects and our interactions with them contribute to cultural formations. Krajewski argues that cultural techniques are "designed to carry out an action that develops cultural efficacy in a specific way through the interplay of purposeful bodily gestures and the use of aids such as tools, instruments or other medial objects",¹¹⁷ following Krämer's argument that through cultural techniques "cognition" becomes "a kind of distributive, and hence collective, phenomenon that is determined by the hands-on contact humans have with things and symbolic and technical artifacts".¹¹⁸ Such descriptions draw out the respective roles of the individual's body and the things-in-the-world involved in any cultural technique.

This description of aesthetic experience and the understanding of the cultural technique of encountering art-objects that we can develop from the writings of Lee and Wilde bear resemblance to Bill Brown's Thing Theory. As Brown notes, "the experience of an encounter depends ... on the projection of an idea (the idea of encounter)", but in the moment of encounter there is a "suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power"; encounters are "occasions of contingency—the chance interruption—that disclose a physicality of things".¹¹⁹ In both Lee's stories and Wilde's novels, chance plays a key role in encounters with art-objects that reveal their primacy over the subject. In Lee's haunted encounters, the physicality of art-objects is transferred to the physicality of the ghosts that they evoke; her haunted observers encounter ghostly bodies and ghostly voices that are free from the

¹¹⁶ The pun is borrowed with admiration from Jeanette Winterson's *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).

¹¹⁷ 'Small Gestures', p.94

¹¹⁸ 'Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques', pp.26-7

¹¹⁹ 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 (2001), 1-22 (pp.3-4)

“dark margins” from which art-objects work in concealment.¹²⁰ Meanwhile, in Wilde’s novel, the physical fact of ageing is deferred to the picture, rendering it both an effect of meaning and one of presence.

Lee’s short stories present encountering art-objects as threatening to the individual subject’s mental and physical health. They show how ghosts are produced out of recursions that take place in moments of physical contact with material things from the past, at the expense of the observer, rather than at their behest. Art-objects lurk on the “dark margins” of Lee’s texts, emerging rarely through brief ekphrases, but otherwise operating upon her characters through what Walter Sickert describes as the capacity of portraits to “tell its story of sympathy and comprehension through years of silent appeal” “on the walls of ... the house where it is meant to live”.¹²¹ Place, for Lee, collaborates with art-objects against her characters, who are mere “addresses” for the “commands” of art-objects. Once transmitted, those commands result in the haunting of the observer, comprising a restriction of the observer effect and, as a sort of corollary, ghosts that take physical shape. The wounding that her haunted characters suffer, sometimes lethal, sometimes only creatively fatal, is correlated with their capacity to accept ghosts—and thus art-objects—on their own terms, to acknowledge and even appreciate them without seeking to share perceived future meanings with others.

In the final chapter, I address Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, wherein ekphrasis is almost wholly absent, but the art-object’s control is pervasive. Aesthetic encounters with art-objects become rare, precious, obsessive, and closed. As in Lee’s ghost stories, Dorian’s portrait lingers on the margins of its *fin-de-siècle* setting, but its physical isolation cannot impede its operation on Dorian, who comes to embody his own observer effect. Recursion is almost annihilated, with the art-object controlling Dorian’s thoughts and actions, including the cultural technique of encounter. This chapter explores the obsessive and possessive relationships between the novel’s characters and its central art-object, all of which are underpinned by jealousy. I focus on jealousy in order to emphasise how art-objects in the novel are both desired possessions over which

¹²⁰ Kane, *Spurious Ghosts*, p.23. Table 2, on p.148, summarises these manifestations.

¹²¹ *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Anna Gruetzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.168

characters compete and exalted idols that the characters compete to imitate, and how Dorian's magical portrait resists both of these subjective desires.

In this Kittlerian literary study, then, I apply the tools of recursion, cultural techniques, and my own notion of the observer effect to address media and people together. I attend to my chosen texts as situated, at times self-consciously, within a discourse network that is increasingly different from that which came before but had not yet undergone the epistemic break of the turn of the century. I demonstrate that, in this moment, the cultural technique of encountering an art-object was conceived of as serving a range of potential purposes that responded to the new threats and anxieties of discourse network 1890. As Krämer suggests, despite the fact that “the idea of culture-as-text is eroding”, following Kittler's argument about the fall of literature's monopoly at the end of discourse network 1800, it was then, and is still, “in the (inter)play with language, images, writing, and machines” “that cultures emerge and reproduce”, and literary criticism is not absent from this interplay.¹²² In the quote with which this introduction began, Wilde terms the act of criticism a process of translation, which we may now more properly think of as transposition. Criticism, too, is driven by choices between information and noise, of texts and images and quotes and references deemed relevant, and new meanings constructed from old ones. Wilde's thought derives from the writings of Théophile Gautier, and Andrew Lang's essay on Gautier's work in *Dark Blue* notes how “to the reader the object of criticism, however familiar, becomes another thing, a source of fresh delight”.¹²³ The aim of criticism, as far as is possible, is to undertake recursions that produce future meanings that are non-obvious, but with which many others may, we hope, agree.

¹²² ‘Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques’, pp.23-4

¹²³ ‘Théophile Gautier’, *Dark Blue*, 1.1 (1871), 26-36 (pp.26-7)

Chapter 1

The pedagogic (description of the) encounter: Michael Field's guidebook

*You are robbing us of real criticism—such as man gives man.*¹²⁴

If, as proposed in the Introduction, we understand criticism as itself a recursion, then this plea from Katharine Bradley to Robert Browning not to reveal her and Edith Cooper as the authors behind Michael Field expresses their desire not only for attention from their fellows to the objective merits of their work, but also recursive engagement with it.¹²⁵ Michael Field wished their work to be woven into the critical tradition through others' recursive engagement with it. Written in 1884, Bradley's plea for recursive reading by critics is at odds with the approach she and Cooper take in their subsequent volume of ekphrastic verse, *Sight and Song* (1892).¹²⁶ By the time they began writing that volume in 1890, Michael Field's dual female identity was common knowledge, much to their chagrin,¹²⁷ and it featured heavily in some of *Sight and Song's* less favourable reviews, apparently including one by Richard Le Gallienne, which Michael Field angrily noted in their diary.¹²⁸ Their hopes of

¹²⁴ Letter from Katharine Bradley to Robert Browning, 23 November 1884, reproduced in *Michael Field, The Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials*, ed. by Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo (Plymouth: Broadview Editions, 2009), pp.311-2

¹²⁵ There is no firm critical consensus on how to refer to Bradley and Cooper and their pseudonym. By what name should critics refer to the author of a text? "Bradley and Cooper", breaking the fiction of their defiantly maintained shared pseudonym? "Field", as though their collaboration were unknown? "Michael Field", in an attempt to reflect both the duality and adopted masculinity of their authorial presence? Moreover, what pronouns should we employ? Singular, male or female? Plural and therefore neuter? I follow Thain's example in using "Michael Field" to reflect the bipartite conception that Bradley and Cooper had of their shared pseudonym, with Bradley as "Michael" and Cooper as "Field". To maintain this duality explicitly, and because it offers a welcome ungendered alternative, I use the pronouns "they", "their" and "them", except where the individual authorship of a particular poem or diary entry is known with a sufficient degree of accuracy and is relevant to my reading.

¹²⁶ *Sight and Song* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892)

¹²⁷ Bradley records in their shared diary their response to being introduced as Michael Field at a gathering at Louise Chandler Moulton's on 21 July 1890: "we stood, our wings vibrating in revolt, while hollow, fashionable women lisped their enchantment at meeting with us. A moment came when this could be borne no longer", and she "laid a master-hand on the hostess, & told her to introduce [them] by [their] Christian names" (*Works and Days*, vol. 3, London, British Library, Add MS 46778, fol.94^r)

¹²⁸ They refer to his *Daily Chronicle* review in their entry for Thursday 9 June 1892, accusing him of doing them a "discourtesy" in his treatment of their dual authorship and their sex, and of

maintaining a single male authorial identity having dissipated, *Sight and Song* takes pains to argue for the aesthetic validity of Michael Field's approach to encountering art-objects, their aspiration of receiving critical engagement "as man gives man" giving way to arguments for the aesthetic rectitude of their proposed cultural technique of encounter, as good as any man's.¹²⁹

Michael Field's aesthetic project

Michael Field's arguments for their objectivist project, set out in the 'Preface' to *Sight and Song*, appear to be founded on what W.J.T. Mitchell terms ekphrastic hope, an "overcom[ing] in imagination or metaphor" of the "commonsense perception" that it is "impossible" for a poem fully to encapsulate the art-object for the reader.¹³⁰ In describing their "method of art-study", which we might call part of the operating script of their cultural technique, Michael Field claim to have absorbed and set down on paper "what poetry [these pictures] objectively incarnate", to have achieved Mitchell's "impossible".¹³¹ *Sight and Song* is the culmination of several visits that Michael Field made to continental Europe, spending many hours in art galleries assiduously recording their encounters with art-objects,¹³² to which they applied "patient, continuous sight, as pure as the gazer can refine it of theory, fancies, or his mere subjective

"giving [their work] a simper" (*Works and Days*, vol. 5, London, British Library, Add MS 46780, fol.105^r).

¹²⁹ Martha Vicinus has written suggestively about how we might distinguish Bradley's and Cooper's individual aesthetic philosophies and aims. She contrasts Cooper, who "looked back to the Romantics" and believed that "feeling, rather than knowledge, was the source of her lyric inspiration", with Bradley, "who was more invested in a Platonic notion of great art" ("Sister Souls": Bernard Berenson and Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper)', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 60.3 (2005), 326-54 (p.334, p.337)). While that contrast hints at a productive media archaeological approach to exploring the authorship of individual poems, verses or lines throughout *Sight and Song*, here I continue to treat the two women as a single poet working at a shared endeavour, as my focus is on the volume itself, rather than its method of production.

¹³⁰ *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.152

¹³¹ *Sight and Song*, p.v

¹³² Their diaries from 1890-2 are filled with these prose reflections, as well as drafts of the poems (Add MS 46778; *Works and Days*, vol. 4, London, British Library, Add MS 46779; Add MS 46780). High-density photographs of those diaries are also available via the Michael Field Diary Archive, *Victorian Lives and Letters Consortium* (Center for Digital Humanities at the University of South Carolina) <http://tundra.csd.sc.edu/vllc/field_diaries> [accessed 17 March 2017].

enjoyment”.¹³³ In doing so, they claim to have “overcome” the barriers to ‘true’ ekphrasis.

Thus, although Renate Brosch suggests that the general action of the observer in response to discourse network 1890’s mood of instability meant a “participatory agency” in encountering art-objects, offering “resistance to absorption by the referential content of an art work”, *Sight and Song* actually invites absorption by the art-object’s visual content.¹³⁴ Further, it invites a belief in the possibility of ekphrases achieving and communicating an “objective” understanding of that art-object’s message that is equivalent to the understanding gained before the art-object itself, without any data loss owing to the “transposition” of data from one medium to another.¹³⁵ The ‘Preface’ seems, implicitly, to answer for us J. Hillis Miller’s question, discussed in the Introduction, of what “completing [the art-object’s] purpose” when encountering it might mean: perfectly reproducing its intrinsic “song”.¹³⁶ Michael Field’s own response to the volume’s publication gives the lie to these ekphrastically hopeful accounts, however. Their diary records their concern that the volume was the “queerest little book”, and that the “Song” “soon fades away”, a fact that makes “[their] teeth chatter with fear”.¹³⁷

I will return to Michael Field’s sense of failure shortly, but first I want to situate them and their volume’s aesthetic project within discourse network 1890. Surrounded by discourse network 1890’s *Stimmung* of noise and instability, *Sight and Song* represents a sort of outlier, or fantastical refuge, as the *Stimmung* that pervades the volume is actually one of fixity, anticipated in the ‘Preface’. As Martha Vicinus describes, the volume mostly ekphrases “different forms of masculinity”, all “arranged for the appreciative observer: isolated, beautiful creatures, untouchable and unchangeable”.¹³⁸ Michael Field argue that, through their “effort to see things from their own centre”, they have been

¹³³ *Sight and Song*, p.v

¹³⁴ ‘Looking at Women Looking: Female Portraits in the Gender Crisis’, *Gender Forum*, 13 (2006), 1-9, <<http://genderforum.org/imagendering-ii-issue-13-2006/>> [accessed 17 March 2017], p.8

¹³⁵ Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. by Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.265

¹³⁶ ‘What Do Stories about Pictures Want?’, *Critical Inquiry*, 34.2 (2008), 59-97

¹³⁷ Add MS 46780, fol.89^v

¹³⁸ “‘Sister Souls’”, p.336

able to “eliminate [their] idiosyncrasies and obtain an impression clearer, less passive, more intimate”. Rather than proposing the art-object as the starting point for an observer effect, they suggest that producing any future meanings through recursion would in fact be an idiosyncratic defect in an observer. Although they allow at the end of the ‘Preface’ that the “effort” to eliminate traces of one’s self is never quite successful, and that “the inevitable force of individuality must still” play a role in “mould[ing] the purified impression”, their model of an observer is of one dedicated to recovering a static, singular meaning that is located in the art-object itself, to a sort of ‘faithful’ recursion.¹³⁹ To allow oneself to experience an observer effect that generates future meanings would be to introduce “idiosyncrasies” that obscure, pacify, and distance the art-object itself. This is summed up in Cooper’s description of writing the first poem of the volume, ‘Watteau’s *L’Indifferent*’:¹⁴⁰ “the impression crystallised into words as if by effortless natural laws”.¹⁴¹ While making a claim for her poetic skill, Cooper also draws attention to the “natural”, and so implicitly ‘correct’ and unchangeable, means by which that “impression” has been recovered.

For such a *Stimmung* of fixity to permeate Michael Field’s work, we know that some “primary experience” must have taken place so often as to become a “preconscious reflex” for them.¹⁴² I suggest that their gendered every-day experiences within art-critical circles lie at the root of such habituation. The forms of art criticism prevalent during the late-nineteenth century, such as the public lecture or published commentary, were strongly associated with masculinity, and although numerous studies have highlighted the growing participation of women in the field in the second half of the nineteenth century,¹⁴³ it remains true that “the Victorian art critic’s voice as a public noise

¹³⁹ *Sight and Song*, p.vi

¹⁴⁰ pp.1-2

¹⁴¹ Add MS 46778, fol.103^v

¹⁴² Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.19

¹⁴³ See, for example, *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts 1820-1979*, ed. by Claire Richter Sherman and Adele M. Holcombe (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981); essays on women’s place in this sphere in France in *Women Art Critics in Nineteenth-Century France: Vanishing Acts*, ed. by Wendelin Guentner (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013); and Meaghan Clarke’s article, ‘1894: The Year of the New Woman Art Critic’, *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga

can be generalized as a male voice, and those individual critics whose voices have been distinguished from the chorus by later generations ... were all men".¹⁴⁴

Both Bradley and Cooper read widely, and they could often be starstruck when encountering their male literary heroes.¹⁴⁵ Both, but particularly Bradley, attended lectures on art history and criticism in London, taking advantage of all the institutions that discourse network 1890 had to offer budding art connoisseurs.¹⁴⁶ Their particular enthusiasm for aesthetic critics peaked in their passion for Bernard Berenson, whom Hilary Fraser suggests "personifie[d] the patriarchal 'male conscience'" for them.¹⁴⁷ In "Sister Souls", Vicinus provides a fascinating study of the development of the relationship between Berenson, Bradley and Cooper after they were introduced by Louise Chandler Moulton in Paris in 1890. Although he was then a struggling art critic, they asked him to provide them with lessons at the Louvre, for a fee, and he became a some-time friend who influenced them both. His advice about the pictures to seek out when they were travelling, and on how to identify and judge individual paintings, had a significant effect on their travels in preparation for writing *Sight and Song*.¹⁴⁸

Thus, although they persisted in writing under a masculine pseudonym, Bradley and Cooper were conscious of their feminised position in their aesthetic

<http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=meaghan-clarke-1894-the-year-of-the-new-woman-art-critic> [accessed 17 March 2017] and her recent essay 'The art press at the fin de siècle: women, collecting, and connoisseurship', *Visual Resources* 31.1-2 (2015), 15-30

¹⁴⁴ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, 'Critically Speaking', in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. by Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp.107-24 (p.109)

¹⁴⁵ As shown in their account of a chance meeting of George Meredith on a train, characterised by extensive whispering and staring from the two women (Add MS 46778, fol.3^r)

¹⁴⁶ For example, Cooper records that "Sim [Bradley] went on Saturday [6 June 1891] to one of Bernie's classes at the Nat. Gal" (Add MS 46779, fol.48^r).

¹⁴⁷ 'A Visual Field: Michael Field and the Gaze', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34 (2006), pp.553-71 (p.559)

¹⁴⁸ Cooper records: "Bernie praised our choice of Dresden; he began to teach me the right understanding of the pictures, & in order that I might recognise a Lotto, not so called" (Add MS 46779, fol.57^r), and "Then we seek out many of the pictures on Bernhard's list, and enjoy the first thrilling shock of their colour and conception" (fol.69^r). Jill Ehnenn has conducted some fascinating forensic work into locating the painting which inspired 'Saint Katharine of Alexandria, by Bartolommeo Veneto', and has identified an altered painting of Narcissus looking into a well as the mis-identified picture in question, with Berenson influential in that mis-identification (presentation during 'What is a (co)author?: Revisiting Michael Field's Collaboration' at NAVSA 2016 (Phoenix: 4 November 2016)).

circle, “speak[ing] from the margins of the emerging art profession”.¹⁴⁹ Recollecting a conversation with Oscar Wilde on 21 July 1890, Bradley notes how much she had “suffered” from Pater’s way of “speak[ing] of the scholarly conscience as male”, although she “recognised [the] justice” of that gendered characterisation.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Bradley pushed back against any misinterpretation of her and Cooper’s work as akin to that of New Women authors, telling Robert Browning that they were not “combating ‘social conventions’” because it was “not in [their] power or desire to treat irreverently customs or beliefs that have been, or are, sacred to men”.¹⁵¹ There are elements both of truth and dissimulation in these remarks, but I suggest that, in *Sight and Song*, Michael Field sought to demonstrate their mastery of the cultural technique of encounter associated with the male critical gaze that they knew only too well.¹⁵²

A large proportion of criticism on Michael Field and *Sight and Song* addresses their work in the context of their gender and sexuality, and it is true that many of Michael Field’s “idiosyncrasies” that surface in the volume—observer effects that introduce new, future meanings to the art-objects in question—are evident, by and large, in poems that reflect their gender and sexuality. Work exploring the queer or lesbian elements of Bradley and Cooper’s lives and writings is widespread, inspired by Lillian Faderman’s 1981 *Surpassing the Love of Men*,¹⁵³ and Christine White’s work, which argued for a more explicitly lesbian character to their relationship and works.¹⁵⁴ These critical

¹⁴⁹ Fraser, ‘A Visual Field’, p.557. Of course, we may not wish to discard the possibility that some of this marginalisation was self-fashioned, in order to position themselves fashionably as outsiders.

¹⁵⁰ Add MS 46778, fol.97^r

¹⁵¹ Letter of 27 November 1884, reproduced in *Michael Field, The Poet*, p.312

¹⁵² The term “male gaze” was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, which has been highly influential on art, film and literary criticism (in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.833-44). The phrase recurs as a critical commonplace in analyses of *Sight and Song*.

¹⁵³ *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981)

¹⁵⁴ White first expounded this view in “Poets and Lovers Evermore”: Interpreting Female Love in the Poetry and Journals of Michael Field’, *Textual Practice*, 4.2 (1990), 197-212. Two later articles further explore the lesbian aspects of Michael Field’s work: ‘Flesh and Roses: Michael Field’s Metaphors of Pleasure and Desire’, *Women’s Writing*, 3.1 (1996), 47-62; and ‘The Tiresian Poet: Michael Field’, in *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.148-61.

approaches include readings based on Michael Field's engagement with the figure of Sappho,¹⁵⁵ lesbian female literary collaboration,¹⁵⁶ and the representation of Venus and lesbian desire.¹⁵⁷

While these analyses have been fruitful and important for situating Michael Field in a broader narrative of female and lesbian aesthetic writing, I would argue that this is not the overall aim of the volume. As Markus Krajewski explains, cultural techniques are “designed to carry out an action that develops cultural efficacy in a specific way through the interplay of purposeful bodily gestures and the use of aids such as tools, instruments or other medial objects”, and Michael Field's cultural technique of encounter is not one that centres the issue of a female—or queer—body in relation to an art-object.¹⁵⁸ Rather, they make a claim for their own individual bodily capacities. Although the gender dynamics that can be read in *Sight and Song* are fascinating, it strikes me as an error to assume that the volume was orientated towards a female, lesbian viewer, or was written with a “female interpretative community” in mind, given that the aesthetic community generally, and Michael Field's specifically, was so predominantly male.¹⁵⁹ It is in this context that we need to understand the sorts of encounters with art-objects that Michael Field sought to represent. Although Michael Field's work may speak of art-objects from a female perspective in a number of interesting ways, Bradley and Cooper chose deliberately to write

¹⁵⁵ Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Francis O’Gorman, ‘Michael Field and Sapphic Fame: “My Dark-Leaved Laurels Will Endure”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34 (2006), 649-61; Richard Dellamora, ‘The Sapphic Culture of Michael Field and Radclyffe Hall’, in *Michael Field and Their World*, ed. by Margaret Stetz and Cheryl Wilson (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2007), pp.127-136

¹⁵⁶ Virginia Blain, “‘Michael Field, the Two-Headed Nightingale’: Lesbian Text as Palimpsest’, *Women’s History Review*, 5.2 (1996), 239-57 (p.244); Emma Donoghue, *Poems Between Women: Four Centuries of Love, Romantic Friendship, and Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Sharon Bickle, ‘Rethinking Michael Field: The Case for the Bodleian Letters’, in *Michael Field and their World*, ed. by Stetz and Wilson, pp.39-47, and *The Fowl and the Pussycat: Love Letters of Michael Field, 1875-1909* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008); Jill Ehnenn, *Women’s Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

¹⁵⁷ Ehnenn, ‘Looking Strategically: Feminist and Queer Aesthetics in Michael Field’s “Sight and Song”’, *Victorian Poetry*, 42 (2004), 213–60; S. Brooke Cameron, ‘The Pleasures of Looking and the Feminine Gaze in Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*’, *Victorian Poetry*, 51.2 (2013), pp.147-75

¹⁵⁸ ‘The Power of Small Gestures: On the Cultural Technique of Service’, trans. by Charles Marcrum, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 94-109 (p.94)

¹⁵⁹ Ehnenn, *Women’s Literary Collaboration*, p.86

under a male pseudonym and were keen to engage with their male peers on equal terms not based on an equality of the sexes, *per se*, but on their own artistic merit, encapsulated in the plea that began this chapter. They wished to be seen as exceptional, not representational, women.

As Vicinus notes, it is only in “a few of the poems” in *Sight and Song* that Michael Field “continue” the “examination of women’s sexual pleasure” that dominates *Long Ago* (1889).¹⁶⁰ Rather, most of the poems in *Sight and Song* “consider different forms of masculinity”, including “effeminate men” and “a variety of fauns and youthful gods”.¹⁶¹ Such figures were, of course, of particular importance to many of Michael Field’s male contemporaries, such as Pater and Wilde, whose works were addressing male homosexual and homosocial desire, both aesthetically and erotically. Accordingly, I suggest that Michael Field’s “idiosyncrasies” do not dictate the content of *Sight and Song* as a whole, and that the volume must be read from a broader perspective.

At the same time, I suggest that there is little more to be gained by seeking precisely to triangulate Michael Field between Pater’s and Ruskin’s aesthetic principles, a path that has been well trodden, not without some irony, by critics who seek to position Michael Field as occupying a deliberately feminist or lesbian space.¹⁶² That readings situating Michael Field’s aesthetic theories alongside their male contemporaries’ continue to spring most instinctively to critics’ minds suggests how firmly embedded Michael Field were within discourse network 1890’s debates about aesthetic theory, with Pater and Ruskin sometime correspondents and their work naturally important intertexts.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889)

¹⁶¹ “Sister Souls”, p.336. Dinah Ward also explores this issue in ‘Michael Field and Saint Sebastian’, in *Michael Field and Their World*, ed. by Stetz and Wilson, pp.163-70.

¹⁶² While Fraser in ‘A Visual Field’ and Vadillo tend towards reading *Sight and Song* as “following a Ruskinian model of visuality” (‘Sight and Song: Transparent Translations and a Manifesto for the Observer’, *Victorian Poetry*, 38 (2000), 15-34 (p.21)), Thain in ‘Michael Field’: *Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Julia F. Saville (‘The Poetic Imagining of Michael Field’, in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), pp.178-206)) suggest that the volume is more in a Paterian vein.

¹⁶³ The question that, implicitly, Thain and Vadillo address is whether Paterians or Ruskinians should have felt most persuaded by the ‘faithful’ ekphrases that Michael Field purport to have written. It is a question that we can imagine Michael Field may have considered themselves when writing.

In suggesting that Michael Field sought to appropriate the male gaze and compete with their male counterparts on their own terms, I admit to succumbing quite willingly to the “psychologizing imperative” of literary criticism and momentarily attending to text as an illumination of “personality”.¹⁶⁴ I do so, however, only to acknowledge *Sight and Song* as a product of its discourse network, and to suggest the source of its *Stimmung* of fixity, with recursions that explicitly claim their faithfulness to the source art-object and assert their own validity to Michael Field’s male contemporaries. While Michael Field did not lecture at galleries or provide lessons in art criticism, their ekphrastic volume functions as an “imagined gallery, *une musée imaginaire*, a veritable ‘museum of words’”, over which they had total control.¹⁶⁵ Within that *musée imaginaire*, Michael Field control the encounters that their ‘students’ are able to undertake, both as a way of demonstrating their mastery of the cultural technique of encounter, learned from their male art-critic friends and mentors, and of setting forth their own aesthetic interpretations.

Thus, although Michael Field “depended upon [Berenson’s] approval of their artistic sensibility”,¹⁶⁶ and would sometimes seek a final determination from him on the details of paintings,¹⁶⁷ they were also willing to push some of the boundaries that ‘Doctrine’ set. Their diaries, letters and works reflect a certain pride in their own moments of insight, perhaps emboldened by their own assessment of how their male counterparts reached their aesthetic judgments. For example, although both women admired Pater’s work, Bradley at one point records a tart critical response to Pater’s subjective aesthetic: “Pater often issues his own emotions, that are very peculiar to himself, as if they were the result of other individualities—to whom he has not been able to give the value

¹⁶⁴ Ellis Hanson, ‘Wilde’s Exquisite Pain’, in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp.101-25 (p.101)

¹⁶⁵ Fraser, ‘A Visual Field’, p.554, citing James Heffernan’s pivotal work on ekphrasis, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.8. Although I here focus on discourse network 1890, *Sight and Song* might be interestingly contrasted with other notional galleries, such as the ones explored in John Hollander’s *The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), including Baroque poet Giambattista Marino’s collection of almost 500 poems, and Andrew Marvell’s seventeenth-century collection of notional ekphrases.

¹⁶⁶ Vicinus, “‘Sister Souls’”, p.334

¹⁶⁷ In a letter during the writing of *Sight and Song*, they ask him whether Giorgione’s Venus was a “noon-tide picture” as it “seem[ed]” to them, “but out on seeming!”: they want his final determination (Berenson Archive, quoted in Fraser, ‘A Visual Field’, p.559).

of an I".¹⁶⁸ Conscious of the flattening, generalising tone that their male counterparts' aesthetic pronouncements could sometimes take, Michael Field were thus willing to risk taking their own approach with a similar attitude. Their proposed "operational script" for encounter was not a secret as they were preparing *Sight and Song*, and they at times had to defend it to male friends.¹⁶⁹ For example, in a letter to Berenson in 1891, Cooper notes "you laugh, and Morelli feels uncomfortable in his grave – but the self-willed poets watch their pictures, receive of them, and write".¹⁷⁰ There is a tone here akin to religious persecution, although partly playful, and many of the poems themselves praise the "self-willed" nature of their subjects, as thought in veiled self-defence.¹⁷¹

Such distinctions, while discernible in *Sight and Song*, are generally held at its edges. More often, the volume seeks to illustrate the understanding of art-objects that Michael Field shared with some of the most influential figures of the period. Their chosen epigraphs are significant. With the first, quoting Sophocles in the Greek, Michael Field build on their reputation as capable classical scholars, already demonstrated in *Long Ago*, with its many quotations of Sapphic fragments. With the second, quoting John Keats, Michael Field lay claim to a fertile nineteenth-century male literary tradition, with some success, as John M. Gray noted in his review how "Keats-like" *Sight and Song* was.¹⁷² The framing of the volume thus asks its readers to see Michael Field as members of an aesthetically and classically educated, predominantly male community.¹⁷³ *Sight and Song* offered Michael Field an opportunity to demonstrate that they, although women, could achieve similar insights into art as the men whose advice they sought.

As well as seeking to emphasise and justify Michael Field's powers of art criticism through its assertions of "objectivity", *Sight and Song* seeks to position Michael Field as what might today be called opinion-leaders, setting expectations for readers' engagement with the ekphrased art-objects. Again,

¹⁶⁸ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng misc.d.333, fols.68-70

¹⁶⁹ Cornelia Vismann, 'Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty', trans. by Ilinca Iurascu, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 83-93 (p.87)

¹⁷⁰ Reproduced in *Michael Field, The Poet*, p.316

¹⁷¹ 'A *Portrait*, by Bartolommeo Veneto' is the clearest example, analysed here on pp.63-5.

¹⁷² 'Review of *Sight and Song*', *Academy* (18 June 1892), 583-4 (p.583)

¹⁷³ Similarly at their request, the volume was bound to resemble Paul Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* (1869) (Add MS 46779, fol.146^r), which they read during their June 1890 continental trip.

their correspondence and diaries are illuminating, suggesting how their primary experiences in discourse network 1890 influenced the mode of acculturation that *Sight and Song* invites through its encounters with art-objects. Bradley records in a letter to Mary Costelloe how she would approach teaching art criticism differently, presumably responding to her own experiences being 'guided' by male contemporaries: "I should never say 'of course such an[d] such person bears trace of Giorgione's influence' such a remark makes the poor student hot with shame & angry at his ignorance".¹⁷⁴ The description calls to mind Cooper's sense of shame at misidentifying a Giorgione during a visit to the National Gallery the year before. Looking at pictures 'in the flesh' was an important communal activity that Bradley and Cooper regularly undertook, and it was one during which personal pride was at stake. On a trip with Costelloe, Berenson and others, Cooper records: "we are taken to the Giorgione – in the dimness I cannot find out which is the picture – I mistake it and try to work up enthusiasm for a poor figure above".¹⁷⁵ Self-critically, she quips, "what an awful element of sham there is in mortals", although one can imagine she might have taken comfort in the fact that "Sim [Bradley] & Miss Hall made the same mistake & strove to make their error loveable to themselves".¹⁷⁶

In the light of such primary experiences, *Sight and Song's* *Stimmung* of fixity is perhaps little surprise. As Cornelia Vismann has argued, "instructions represent a layman's ultimate form of access to implicit or *tacit knowledge*, as Bruno Latour has defined this kind of practical expertise".¹⁷⁷ Within their social circle, Michael Field seemed always to be seeking out practical expertise, and *Sight and Song* was an attempt to codify and pass on what tacit knowledge they had gained through a set of instructions that, nevertheless, avoided saying "of course" to the reader.

However, in positioning *Sight and Song* to rival, albeit obliquely, the opinion-forming art criticism of men by providing lessons for readers in the 'right'

¹⁷⁴ Letter of 2 February 1892, reproduced in *Michael Field, The Poet*, p.328

¹⁷⁵ The identification of a painter from "optical stylistic evidence" was a crucial part of the formation of a new artistic canon in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, of which Berenson was a part (Margaret Cohen and Anne Higonnet, 'Complex Culture', in *The Nineteenth Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Vanessa R Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.15-26 (p.21)).

¹⁷⁶ Add MS 46779, fol.49^{f-v}

¹⁷⁷ 'Sovereignty', p.88, original emphasis

method of encountering art-objects, Michael Field also constructed the volume in such a way that it demands the sort of imaginative self-suppression that they had learned to exhibit through their lessons on art from male critics. The volume provides all of the paratextual information a budding student could wish for—title, painter, and location—as well as deliberately exact ekphrastic descriptions of the art-objects in question, intended to instruct the reader.¹⁷⁸ This material is both a boon and an imposition on the observer’s imaginative freedom. As Gérard Genette has suggested, the paratext is a “threshold”, rather than a “boundary or a sealed border”, which operates as a “strategy” to “control one’s whole reading of the text”, and Michael Field deploy this rhetorical strategy to good effect in seeking to control the encounters with art-objects that are possible through their ekphrases.¹⁷⁹

This is not to suggest that Michael Field themselves do not achieve observer effects in their encounters with art-objects, or that their poems do not describe those observer effects. It is clear that there is, as they acknowledge, a “persistent role of subjective sight” within their poems.¹⁸⁰ However, the poems of *Sight and Song* are each presented as a conclusive act of recursion, discarding any ongoing chain of recursions in favour of a supposedly “objective” view. Michael Field seem to suggest that, for those who have mastered the cultural technique of encounter that develops the skills of “pure” sight and “transparent” translation, there is no observer effect creatively producing future meanings of the art-object, and no data lost in the ekphrastic process. Like the male mentors who asserted the rectitude of their own interpretations in favour of the two women’s, then, Michael Field invite their readers to “suppress the habitual centralisation of the visible in [them]selves” in order to appreciate the “purified impression[s]” of Michael Field’s ekphrases.¹⁸¹

As Fabienne Moine notes, Michael Field situate themselves as “in charge of translating—and they insist on this word—the poetics present in the paintings

¹⁷⁸ It is perhaps worth noting that, while such information seems to twenty-first-century readers like par for the course, the presence of such curatorial information on the wall with each piece of art is a relative innovation.

¹⁷⁹ *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.1-2, citing Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p.45

¹⁸⁰ Cameron, ‘Pleasures of Looking’, p.156

¹⁸¹ *Sight and Song*, p.vi

into their poems, as if there were no barriers between the object and the subject”.¹⁸² However, we know that such barriers *do* exist between media, and between a medium and a subject, and that an author’s sense of being “in charge” is usually doomed to failure. A “medium is a medium is a medium”, and the “transposition” of data from one medium into another is always “to a degree arbitrary”, leaving “gaps” despite any authorial intentions.¹⁸³ Moine herself refuses to allow Michael Field their overreaching, going on to use the word that Kittler proposes for such reprocessing of data between media: “The gaze of the Old Italian Master is *transposed* into that of lesbian aesthetes and poets”.¹⁸⁴

It is worth dwelling for a moment on how critics have generally responded to Michael Field’s assertions of “translating”, in order to illustrate the usefulness of Kittler’s formulation in eliminating metaphors that conceal as much as they reveal. Ana Parejo Vadillo accepts Michael Field’s assertion of “translations”, taking them at their word, and she suggests that their “translations” have a “reproductive quality in the sense that they allow the original to be disseminated” via a “refraction”.¹⁸⁵ The metaphor here is muddled, and although I do not wish to labour the point, there is a contradiction between a translation of an image, in which each point stays in the same relation to every other point, and a refraction, an oblique turn in which points are separated and drawn apart, like white light forming a rainbow through a prism.¹⁸⁶ Taking a different tack, Marion Thain suggests that Michael Field did not mean “translation” literally, as “seeing the content of one thing through the formal features of another”. Acknowledging that ekphrasis does not and cannot constitute the “translating of one thing into another”, she suggests that this was “not what Michael Field have in mind”, proposing instead that ekphrasis

¹⁸² ‘Italian Rewritings by Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: From Constructing a Community of Women to Creating a Place of Poetical Freedom’, in *Travels and Translation: Anglo-Italian Cultural Transactions*, ed. by Alison Yarrington, Stefano Villani, and Julia Kelly (New York: Rodopi, 2013), pp.205-18 (p.208)

¹⁸³ Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p.265

¹⁸⁴ ‘Italian Rewritings’, p.208, emphasis mine

¹⁸⁵ ‘Transparent Translations’, p.19

¹⁸⁶ The metaphor of “refraction” to think through how ideas are reworked and reused is employed to better effect by Ana Rueda in her study of modern uses of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth, *Pigmali3n y Galatea: Refracciones modernas de un mito* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1998).

“aspire[s]” to a “*combination* of modes”, and that we should consider their “translations” as instances of synaesthesia.¹⁸⁷

However, “synaesthesia” is also a poor metaphor here. It entered common English usage during discourse network 1890 and provides a ‘catch-all’ term for misinterpretations of sensory data or “sensory ‘confusion[s]’” that were discussed far earlier by other names, as Anna Maria Jones notes.¹⁸⁸ Several critics have addressed the place of synaesthesia in nineteenth-century aestheticism,¹⁸⁹ but it will not do to describe the particular effects of ekphrasis, which does not result in a confusion or misinterpretation. Rather, “synaesthesia” is often metaphoric shorthand for the stimulation of multiple senses through description. For example, Jones argues that Algernon Charles Swinburne’s ‘The End of a Month’ is synaesthetic because “descriptions of scent, heat, stickiness, and color are juxtaposed to represent the soul’s lasting impressions of the lovers’ passion”.¹⁹⁰ Jones’ use of the word “juxtapose” gives the lie to her assertion that what takes place is strictly synaesthesia. Swinburne’s rapid-fire use of descriptions relating to various senses seeks to overwhelm the reader imaginatively, so that the poem might be experienced as a profound sensory experience whereby each piece of sensory data—scent, heat, texture, colour—augments the others. This is closer to what Pater argued for, and what Swinburne himself discusses in ‘Simeon Solomon’: “the subtle interfusion of art with art, of sound with form, of vocal words with silent colours, is as perceptible to the sense and as inexplicable to the understanding”.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ ‘*Michael Field*’, p.70, emphasis mine

¹⁸⁸ ‘On the Publication of *Dark Blue*, 1871-73’, *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga, <http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=anna-maria-jones-on-the-publication-of-dark-blue-1871-73> [accessed 17 March 2017], para.14. Jones cites Linda K. Hughes’ description of how “alternative approaches to the relation among word, image, and music ... circulated widely, often overlapping and contradicting each other” (‘Visible Sound and Auditory Scenes: Word, Image, and Music in Tennyson, D. G. Rossetti, and Morris’, in *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth-Century: Image, Sound, Touch*, ed. by Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), pp.137–57 (p.142)).

¹⁸⁹ See, for example, Catherine Maxwell’s study of Swinburne’s work in *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp.195-99, and Andrew Eastham’s ‘Walter Pater’s Acoustic Space: “The School of Giorgione”, Dionysian “Andres-streben”, and the Politics of Soundscape’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 40.1-2 (2010), 196-216.

¹⁹⁰ ‘*Dark Blue*, 1871-73’, para.19; ‘The End of a Month’, *Dark Blue*, 1.2 (1871), 217-20

¹⁹¹ ‘Simeon Solomon: Notes on His “Vision of Love” and Other Studies’, *Dark Blue*, 1.5 (1871), 568-77 (p.568)

The metaphor of synaesthesia, then, misleads, promising something rather more than it delivers, a little like ekphrasis itself. Jones proposes that, in an “aesthetic sense”, synaesthesia “indicates the imaginative (and creative) work it takes to think one art form *through* another”, accepting both the “failure to capture the original exactly”—the inevitable gaps of transposition—and “the sense that something new is added in the process”, that is to say, that the process is recursive and leads to a different present.¹⁹² I would suggest that the concept of the observer effect better captures the nature of these simultaneous steps both toward and away from the original art-object, and that speaking of combinations or juxtapositions might give greater clarity than speaking of synaesthesia.

The structure of Sight and Song

Having clarified the broad nature of Michael Field’s project, then, let us turn to how they structured their volume to serve a pedagogic function, schooling the reader in their proposed cultural technique of encountering art-objects. Each poem focuses on a single art-object, and they can be broadly divided into three categories: poems about scenes, which situate the narrator and reader within the frame, rendering the answer to the question, ‘Does this poem refer to an art-object?’ non-obvious; poems about paintings, which place the narrator and reader outside the frame of the painting and indicate its physical boundaries and place on the wall; and poems that are liminal, drifting between those two poles. I refer to these types as ‘painting’,¹⁹³ ‘scene’, and ‘liminal’ poems respectively, with the latter sub-categorised as either predominantly ‘painting’ or ‘scene’ poems.¹⁹⁴ With each type of poem, Michael

¹⁹² ‘*Dark Blue*, 1871-73’, para.16

¹⁹³ I use this term notwithstanding the fact that several poems pertain to drawings. As a generic term, ‘painting poem’ is the more convenient, and I hope that the technical inaccuracy might be forgiven.

¹⁹⁴ In ‘Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis’, Peter Barry distinguishes between “closed” ekphrases that are “explicit” in “not speaking about a real, witnessed event, but about what is seen” in an image, and “open” ekphrases where “the object of the ekphrasis is presented ‘unframed’, and so could be taken as a description of (say) an actual scene” (*The Cambridge Quarterly*, 31.2 (2002), 155-65 (p.156)). He proposes that, “in practice ... the most interesting examples” are “‘ajar” (p.156). I choose to employ different terminology in order to both address where the poem seeks to focus the observer’s attention, and to discern further nuance in the idea of “ajar” ekphrases as Michael Field’s emphasis is often on *how* ajar their ekphrasis is.

Field suggest a form of response to the art-object, which might call attention to itself as art-object or wholly absorb the observer in its visual content.

Two exemplars may helpfully illustrate these different responses: ‘*L’Indifférent*’ and ‘*A Sant’ Imagine*, by Fiorenzo di Lorenzo’.¹⁹⁵ ‘*L’Indifferent*’, first published in the *Academy*, is one of the shortest poems in *Sight and Song* and describes the figure of a male dancer. Cooper’s prose notes on the painting record her impression of the dancer as “a human butterfly with all the sadness of a creature without a soul” who “toys with his hands” and “almost pirouettes on his light, fantastic toe”, and the subsequent poem focuses on these qualities: the light and beautiful motion, and the soullessness (or titular indifference) of the dancer, who responds to nothing but the urge to dance.¹⁹⁶ The narrator seeks to engage him in conversation—“*Sweet herald, give thy message!*” and “*Gay youngster ... / Come, laugh and love!*”—but he is silent in return, “danc[ing] on”.¹⁹⁷ His continuous dancing and the narrator’s meditation on his “fate”—“To merely dance where he is found”—imply a lightness and mobility to the figure being observed, the “human butterfly” who is impossible to distract.¹⁹⁸ The contextual information given in the title and sub-title of the poem are the only indicators that the poem describes a painted image. We could easily imagine the poem having been written from the memory of a ballet and titled ‘*Le Danseur*’.

By contrast, ‘*A ‘Sant’ Imagine*’ responds very differently to the art-object, with the opening line: “A Holy Picture”.¹⁹⁹ Of course, this is not quite determinative—the cliché “You look a picture!” indicates as much—but these initial words are clear about the poem’s intentions to describe not only the scene shown in the painting, but the art-object *per se*. The title itself merits attention, as it is not a translation of “A Holy Picture”, nor the name of the painting itself (*Madonna and Child with Saint Sebastian and Saint Christopher*). The title is a construction of Michael Field’s own imagination, illustrated in the divergent ways in which it is printed in the text: ‘*A Sant’ Imagine*’, in the table of

¹⁹⁵ *Sight and Song*, pp.1-2, pp.34-8

¹⁹⁶ Add MS 46778, fol.74^r

¹⁹⁷ l.3, ll.13-4, l.4, original emphasis

¹⁹⁸ ll.8-9, l.15

¹⁹⁹ l.1

contents, but ‘A ‘Sant’ Imagine’ atop the poem itself, and in subsequent headers, an apparent accident that indicates the fundamental instability of Michael Field’s attempt to fix the meaning of the art-object. The set of enclosing quotation marks in the latter references indicates a language shift, but “Sant’ Imagine” is itself either pidgin Latin or pidgin Italian, depending on one’s point of view. “Sant’” is the abbreviated Italian adjective “holy”, versus the Latin “sanctus”. “Imagine” is a construction of the Latin “imāgō” (image, likeness, depiction) in the ablative case, which indicates perhaps the agency of the art-object, or the observer’s separation from it. The lack of a verb makes it difficult to determine which, mirroring the dash that succeeds “A Holy Picture”. Michael Field begin with a construction that might be interpretative—a holy picture distances us from ourselves, brings us closer to God, etc.—but terminate that train of thought abruptly in favour of a descriptive approach to the art-object that situates itself resolutely outwith the picture frame.

Immediately after this abrupt dash, the poem reflects on key components of a painted image, namely “colour” (“variably fair”) and “device” (“fantastic”).²⁰⁰ The next sentence engages, albeit obliquely, with the painter’s actions and his (imagined) emotional response to the content of his painting: “ecstasy” as he “la[ys] / The pattern of this red brocade” and positions the Madonna and child “full in view” of the represented saints in a “great, central form”.²⁰¹ The poem questions the artist’s compositional choice in setting the Virgin Mary and Jesus centrally “in such splendour” when they are surrounded by “the martyrdom they wrought” before focusing on the ‘wings’ of the painting, mixing literal description of the art-object with interpretation of the painted characters’ interiority.²⁰² For example, “young St. Christopher” with eyes of “Umbria’s blue” “stands nobly to the right”, and Michael Field read his expression as “question[ing]” how the infant Jesus will eventually produce his “acute distress”.²⁰³ In the final stanza, “back to the picture’s self we come” to consider it as a whole, taking in elements

²⁰⁰ II.1-2

²⁰¹ II.3-4, 7-8

²⁰² I.12, I.9

²⁰³ II.15-7, I.23

of the background—the “marbles” and “palm-branch”—that are fittingly beautiful for those “who are born for martyrdom”.²⁰⁴

These two exemplars indicate some of the key elements that might characterise a scene or painting poem. The former, impressionistic, focuses on the characters and events depicted. At times, it may also convey Michael Field’s own observer effect, such as imagining the moment that immediately precedes or follows the art-object’s scene, and it is to these poems that critics who provide feminist or lesbian interpretations of the volume most often turn. The latter sort of poem is necessarily more fragmented, as it focuses on distinct elements of the painting in turn and addresses the composition and form of the painting, providing specific directional queues, such as right/left. These painting poems are the most successfully “objective”; as Nicholas Frankel has suggested, the collection’s “lyric poetry [becomes] ‘objective’ or concrete” when “the lyric ‘I’ is replaced by a language spoken by the poem-object itself”, its “objects, lines, and colors”.²⁰⁵

In both types of poem, however, as Julia F. Saville notes, Michael Field exhibit an “urgent wish to privilege the concrete materiality of the image in a manner quite different from that of their ekphrastic predecessors”, manifested in a careful adherence to the “literal and figurative designs” of the art-objects they have encountered.²⁰⁶ Although, as David E. Wellbery notes, literature is the “product of a selection and rarefaction”, a range of discriminations between information and noise, Michael Field are not very selective in their ekphrases and seek to retain as much of the art-object’s data as possible in their transpositions into a verbal medium.²⁰⁷

In the remainder of this chapter, I seek to interpret *Sight and Song* as a whole, taking an approach similar to that of Kenneth Ireland’s 1977 essay, which has been rather overlooked.²⁰⁸ That early essay identifies a unifying

²⁰⁴ ll.57, l.61, l.64, l.66

²⁰⁵ ‘The Concrete Poetics of Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*’, in *Michael Field and Their World*, ed. by Stetz and Wilson, pp.211-221 (p.212)

²⁰⁶ p.183

²⁰⁷ ‘Foreword’, in *Discourse Networks*, pp.vii-xxxiii (p.xiv)

²⁰⁸ ‘*Sight and Song: A Study of the Interrelations between Painting and Poetry*’, *Victorian Poetry*, 15.1 (1977), 9-20. This is not to say that more holistic analysis of the volume has been abandoned. Vadillo provides a partially linear analysis, finding that “toward the end ... it is clear that Michael Field has completely transformed the visual aesthetics advocated by Pater, and his

thematic structure in *Sight and Song*, centred on the themes of love and beauty, represented lyrically across the volume in swells of local focus, such as on divine love.²⁰⁹ I, too, propose to analyse such ebbs and flows in order to read *Sight and Song* as a pedagogic endeavour.

Table 1, opposite, provides my classifications of the volume's 31 poems, with shading demonstrating various intermediary stages of liminality. This analysis shows a preponderance of poems that are absorbed by the art-objects' referential content, lying at the 'scene' end of the spectrum, with relatively few pure painting poems, as well as indicating several localised groups of liminal poems. I exercise a degree of aesthetic judgment here; the question of whether liminal poems are more 'painting' or 'scene' is one that I have answered on the basis of my own readings, many of which I set out here. Although, each poem can be taken on its own terms, this overview can help us navigate the volume, drawing formal connections and distinctions that might otherwise elude us.

Michael Field invite the reading observer to understand the type of the poem as dictated by the art-object itself, part of the "song" that it sings. This reflects Vismann's suggestion that "all media and things supply their own rules of execution".²¹⁰ That is to say, the precise nature of the encounter—whether it involves absorption by the art-object's content, or attention to it as a material art-object—is dictated by the art-object itself. *Sight and Song* orders the poems according to increasingly fine gradations, with the observer detecting the art-object *qua* art-object through subtler indications as the volume comes to focus almost solely on scene or liminal scene poems. By thus focusing the observer on the content of the art-objects, and on markers that reflect on the poets' encountering of it in a specific gallery or collection, the volume works to preclude and prevent any observer effects by the readers.

subjectivity is rejected in favour of a more autonomous aesthetic of the visual" ('Transparent Translations', p.31). However, analyses of the volume as a whole are often now eschewed in favour of analyses of specific issues, particularly gender and sexuality. In another form, Ivor C. Treby's efforts to classify Michael Field's works share this interest in the whole over the part (see *Michael Field Catalogue: A Book of Lists* (Padstow: De Blackland Press, 1998) and *Binary Star: Leaves from the Journal and Letters of Michael Field 1846-1914* (Padstow: De Blackland Press, 2006)).

²⁰⁹ Ireland, 'Interrelations', p.15

²¹⁰ 'Sovereignty', p.87

Table 1 – The progress of *Sight and Song*

| Poem | Categorisation |
|---|------------------|
| Watteau's <i>L'Indifférent</i> | Scene |
| Correggio's <i>Venus, Mercury and Cupid</i> | Painting |
| <i>A Drawing of Roses and Violets</i> , by Leonardo da Vinci | Painting |
| <i>La Gioconda</i> | Scene |
| <i>The Faun's Punishment</i> , a Drawing by Correggio | Scene/liminal |
| Botticelli's <i>Birth of Venus</i> | Scene |
| Correggio's <i>Antiope</i> | Scene |
| Benozzo Gozzoli's <i>Treading the Press</i> | Scene |
| Botticelli's <i>Spring</i> | Scene/liminal |
| <i>A Portrait</i> , by Bartolommeo Veneto | Painting/liminal |
| <i>Saint Katharine of Alexandria</i> , by Bartolommeo Veneto | Painting/liminal |
| Correggio's <i>Saint Sebastian</i> | Scene |
| <i>A Sant' Imagine</i> , by Fiorenzo di Lorenzo | Painting |
| <i>The Rescue</i> , by Tintoretto | Scene |
| Botticelli's <i>Venus and Mars</i> | Scene/liminal |
| Piero di Cosimo's <i>Death of Procris</i> | Scene/liminal |
| Cosimo Tura's <i>Saint Jerome in the Desert</i> | Scene |
| <i>Mettus Curtius</i> | Scene |
| <i>A Fête Champêtre</i> , by Watteau | Scene |
| Giorgione's <i>Shepherd Boy</i> | Scene/liminal |
| Antonello da Messina's <i>Saint Sebastian</i> | Scene |
| Timoteo Viti's <i>Magdalen</i> | Scene |
| <i>A Pen Drawing of Leda</i> , by Sodoma | Scene/liminal |
| Tintoretto's <i>Marriage of Bacchus and Ariadne</i> | Scene |
| <i>The Venus</i> in Botticelli's <i>Spring</i> | Scene |
| Perugino's <i>Apollo and Marysas</i> | Scene/liminal |
| Giovanni Bellini's <i>Blood of the Redeemer</i> | Scene/liminal |
| Giorgione's <i>Sleeping Venus</i> | Scene/liminal |
| <i>A Pietà</i> , by Carlo Crivelli | Painting/liminal |
| <i>The Virgin, Child and Saint John</i> , by Lorenzo di Credi | Scene |
| Watteau's <i>L'Embarquement Pour Cythère</i> | Scene |

Following Michael Field's lead

I have already addressed the volume's opening poem, '*L'Indifférent*', an exemplar scene poem. That poem is followed by two of the volume's three painting poems, the third being our other exemplar, '*A Sant' Imagine*', which occurs almost midway through the volume as a reminder of the lessons that the reader is supposed to have drawn from the preceding poems. The positioning of two painting poems at the beginning of the volume, following a scene poem, suggests that Michael Field use these opening poems to educate the reader about the parameters of encountering art-objects through ekphrasis.

'Correggio's *Venus, Mercury and Cupid*' opens with the word "Here", adverbially locating the scene, or "masque", before a viewing "we".²¹¹ Such adverbs of place comprise what Valentine Cunningham calls a "grammar of pointing", common in ekphrases. Cunningham asks what happens when "the linear flow of narrative slows or even stops, to encounter some spatial form[?]", "What are these pausings for thought provoking us to really think about?". The answer that he gives is "*thereness*" because, he suggests, "writing is always tormented by the question of real presence, by challenges to knowability, by the problematics of truth and validity, the difficulty of being sure about what it might be pointing to outside of itself".²¹²

Such adverbs reflect on what is 'out there', then, in this case, the art-object on the gallery wall before Michael Field's eyes, which they purport to have transported to the observer through their ekphrasis. The observer, as imagined by Michael Field, is a perfect "*camera obscura*", able to reconstruct the art-object exactly from their "objective" ekphrasis.²¹³ The plural pronoun, "we", draws the reader and poets together as joint observers in the enterprise of encountering the art-object, unlike in '*L'Indifferent*', where the narratorial voice addresses the dancer apart from the reader. The language is that of a museum tour guide, echoed in the second line's description of "a Venus" (Michael Field's

²¹¹ pp.3-4 (l.1). There is a perhaps unconscious echo here of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'For Spring, by Sandro Botticelli. (*In the Accademia of Florence.*)', published in *Ballads and Sonnets* (London: F.S. Ellis, 1881), p.312. That poem opens with the question "What masque of what old wind-withered New Year / Honours this Lady?" (ll.1-2). The framing of both poems—Rossetti's questioning and Michael Field's good-natured assertion—indicates the difference of approach.

²¹² 'Why Ekphrasis?', *Classical Philology*, 102.1 (2007), 57-71 (p.61, original emphasis)

²¹³ Kittler, *Optical Media*, trans. by Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p.139

musée imaginaire does, after all, contain several).²¹⁴ Having situated us thus, fixed before Michael Field's "here", the short poem that follows is a brisk drama, sketched out with such rapidity that an observer effect is almost impossible for a casual reader. We can grasp, however, that the narrative focus is on "infant-teaching" in a "poignant hour serene", an emphasis that is gently suggestive of quiet studentship, in contrast to the yearning of '*L'Indifférent*'.²¹⁵

The subsequent '*A Drawing of Roses and Violets*, by Leonardo da Vinci' is blatantly a painting poem, as it describes the moment of production.²¹⁶ Comprising a series of unorganised sketches, the art-object certainly does seem to dictate this approach by the poet-observers, who are subject to its "rules of execution". However, while '*Venus, Mercury and Cupid*' calms the reader into a mood of quiet studentship after '*L'Indifférent*'s emotional peak, '*Roses and Violets*' asks the observer to honour the original creator of the art-object as a further cause for interpreting it in a fixed fashion according to their observer effect. This painting poem illustrates that the volume's *Stimmung* of fixity is intended to apply only to those who come after Michael Field, their students, while they themselves assert their authority alongside their male mentors.

As part of their observer effect, Michael Field place in the mouth of da Vinci a number of interpretations of what he has sketched and why. He personifies the flowers—Michael Field imagine—as flirtatious women: "With shaded wiles", one "hides and yet smiles".²¹⁷ Such imagined views are often elaborately wrought, as when Da Vinci 'sees'

In the rose's amorous, open coil
Women's placid temples that would foil
Hearts in the luring way
That checks and dooms
Men with reserve
Of limpid curve.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ '*Venus, Mercury, and Cupid*', l.2

²¹⁵ l.18, l.13

²¹⁶ pp.5-7

²¹⁷ ll.10-1

²¹⁸ ll.17-22

They continue through the sketches, imagining similar trains of thoughts for each. Thus, in the violets he “[f]ound” “the precious smile that weaves / Sweetness round Madonna’s mouth”.²¹⁹ While presenting these ideas quite matter-of-factly, the odd sequence of events in the poem, with da Vinci’s past tense (he “saw”, “drew”, and “loved”) intermingled with the flowers’ present tense (the violet “blows”, “shoots”), which is shared by an imagined art-object depicting the Madonna (whose smile “weaves” and “heaves”), suggests that Michael Field have an acute understanding of the creative function as recursive and of art-objects as potentially holding both past and present meanings.²²⁰

They thus attribute to da Vinci something like an observer effect, which through his creative work is stored and transmitted to the poets as the (supposed) sole past meaning of those blooms. Michael Field’s poem admits to being in a recursive chain, but claims that its role is only to identify and describe da Vinci’s observer effect, denying the poets’ own observer effect, which has invented the thoughts and feelings of da Vinci. Consequently, by proposing that the recursive chain is at an end, they refuse the possibility that the reader may have an observer effect of his own. In this way, the art-object resembles the wax works in Westminster Abbey that Michael Field described in ‘Effigies’, providing “the ideal lines of life” combined with “the *imprimatur* of death”.²²¹

Sight and Song continues with a run of scene poems, temporarily interrupted by a liminal scene poem, ‘*The Faun’s Punishment, a Drawing by Correggio*’, which functions as a training exercise, indicating to the reader how some encounters with art-objects may be staged affairs, involving both absorption by visual content and a more detached contemplation of the art-object *qua* art-object.²²² The poem opens with a set of questions that appear to invite imaginative responses from the reader, prefacing the ekphrasis with the sorts of framing narrative that might precede a close inspection of an art-object’s representative content. As well as helping to produce the poem’s liminality, these questions serve an additional pedagogic function in emphasising the nature of Michael Field’s ekphrases as terminal recursions.

²¹⁹ ll.28-9

²²⁰ l.1, l.11, l.22., l.23, l.25, l.27, l.28

²²¹ *The Art Review* (March 1890), 88-90 (p.90, original emphasis)

²²² pp.9-12

Michael Field open the poem by asking “What has the tortured, old Faun been doing? / What was his impious sin ...[?]”, and conclude it with their own answer, introduced by further questions that indicate the pedagogic intention of the questioning: “What meaning is here, or what mystery, / What fate, and for what crime?”, they ask.²²³ The crime, they answer, is that “the grey-beard shook / At the Maenads’ torn, / Spread hair” and their “dancing”; the meaning, simply that “women will never brook / Mirth at their folly, O doomed, old Faun!”.²²⁴ There is no “mystery”, and what “fate” is in evidence is merely the product of the art-object’s representation, which forever shows this present moment of punishment. The poets thus neatly solve the questions that might arise for an observer encountering the art-object on the wall, and the intervening lines only demonstrate the static nature of the scene. The Maenads “have ceased” their chase of cattle to “compass him round”, and “have ... fetched” their instruments of torture.²²⁵ The motion of their “faces” and “cords” is fixed, “hate-stretched” and “fastened with strain”, with one “wait[ing]” for the conclusion of her snakes’ “rigid pause” in pulling back before biting the Faun.²²⁶ The poem’s *Stimmung* of fixity is thus attributed to the art-object, as though part of its “objective” truth, rather than Michael Field’s observer effect.

Approximately a third of the way through *Sight and Song*, we encounter a set of poems that cross the boundary between scene and painting to varying degrees: ‘*A Portrait*, by Bartolommeo Veneto’ and ‘*Saint Katharine of Alexandria*, by Bartolommeo Veneto’, combined with the poem that precedes them, ‘*Botticelli’s Spring*’.²²⁷ ‘*Spring*’ has proven popular in critical readings of *Sight and Song*, owing to its focus on Venus, so I will not give a detailed reading of the poem here. However, it serves as an interesting example of how Michael Field used *Sight and Song* to showcase small distinctions in their interpretations of art-objects versus those of their male mentors. In September 1890, Bradley recorded her disagreement with Berenson over the correct interpretation of the Graces and Hermes’ presence in *Spring*. In her diary entry,

²²³ ll. 1-2, ll. 49-50

²²⁴ ll. 55-7, ll. 59-60

²²⁵ l. 3, l. 5, l. 10

²²⁶ ll. 8-9, ll. 29-31

²²⁷ pp. 27-30, p. 31, pp. 22-6

she emphasises that whilst Berenson had “a dim theory as to the presence of Hermes”, she “knew why Hermes [wa]s there”, and that she disputed Berenson’s “fancy” that the Graces were “really the Three Fates”, although she acknowledges that, this distinction notwithstanding, “Still the reading of the picture would be much the same”.²²⁸ Here, Bradley tinkers at the edges of received aesthetic interpretation: she inserts her own greater knowledge—she “knows” while Berenson has but “a dim theory” and a “fancy”—but the ultimate outcome is little changed.²²⁹ Nevertheless, Bradley’s interpretation is incorporated into ‘*Spring*’ as a small victory of Michael Field’s aesthetic judgment versus that of their male mentors.²³⁰

I characterise ‘*Spring*’ as a liminal scene poem, rather than a liminal painting poem such as the ones that follow it. This distinction is one of degree, but my characterisation derives from ‘*A Portrait*’s explicit references to an act of modelling for a painting and ‘*Saint Katharine*’s emphasis on the pause that the art-object brings to the ekphrastic text, both of which are lacking in ‘*Spring*’. In her analysis of ‘*Spring*’, Thain agrees that Michael Field’s focus is on the scene content of the art-object, arguing that they “[transport] themselves *into* Venus” as a “way of seeing things ‘from their own centre’ and suppressing ‘the habitual centralisation of the visible in ourselves’”. She argues that their “strategy” of “imaginatively reconstructing the scene from a viewpoint” within it “avoids the confrontation between the gaze of the object and the gaze of the subject” that can be seen in other poems.²³¹ Nevertheless, the poem is liminal because of how it describes the scene from an external standpoint. For example, one grouping of characters is described as “these” who “riot by the left side of the queen”.²³² Although the right-left orientation is reversed, to accommodate the idea that it is Venus’ description, “these” and “by the side of the queen” are

²²⁸ It is impossible to know how much Bradley disagreed with Berenson in person, but the note that she had her insight regarding Hermes “coming home in the train” suggests that there is something of *l’esprit de l’escalier* about the disagreement (Add MS 46778, fols.102^v-103^r). Cooper also makes her differences from Berenson’s interpretations felt in writing. In a letter to him of 1891 regarding *Der Traum*, she says, “In one detail you are certainly wrong: the cock does not strut” (reproduced in *Michael Field, The Poet*, p.315).

²²⁹ Similarly, Cooper records how, during their travels in preparing *Sight and Song*, she “read Pater’s remarks on Romanino & Moretto before the pictures”, but then set about recording her own impressions of them (Add MS 46778, fol.118^r)

²³⁰ l.37, ll.57-64

²³¹ ‘*Michael Field*’, p.75, p.77, original emphasis

²³² ‘*Spring*’, l.25

wholly artificial descriptions, depersonalising both Venus and the revellers in a way that belies the supposed “transporting” of Michael Field into her subjectivity. Similarly, the Graces are “another group” that “is seen” “before her face”.²³³ Michael Field cannot help but force us to recognise their position as observer in encountering the art-object.

The poem that follows, ‘*A Portrait*’, also purports to describe the interiority of the depicted woman while privileging Michael Field’s own interpretation of that “fair, blank form”.²³⁴ It is important to note that Michael Field resist the critical commonplace of calling the painting *Flora*, which Saville argues allows them to make the female body “autonomous, free terrain”.²³⁵ However, we know that Michael Field did—at the suggestion of Berenson²³⁶—amend the title of their draft poem ‘*Mona Lisa*’ to ‘*La Gioconda*’, and critics have not interpreted that change as having a negative impact on their ability to represent that female body as autonomous from the male gaze.²³⁷ Therefore, I propose that we interpret the choice of title not as an act designed to liberate the depicted female body, but one designed to liberate Michael Field as observers, allowing them imaginatively to explore the moments before the painting through their observer effect, and in turn to set out the results of that observer effect as definitive.

As in ‘*Roses and Violets*’, Michael Field’s observer effect reflects on the moment of artistic production, with the same aim of establishing their interpretation as “objective” and final. However, they now attribute the poem’s *Stimmung* of fixity in their ekphrasis to its subject, who may or may not be Lucrezia Borgia, rather than to the art-object, as they did in ‘*A Faun’s Punishment*’. ‘*A Portrait*’ traces its way through present, past and future tenses: “neither love nor time has conquered” her appearance; “she saw her beauty often in the glass”; “she will be painted”.²³⁸ The poem joins the subject in her

²³³ l.26

²³⁴ l.42

²³⁵ ‘Poetic Imagining’, p.193. The picture has been otherwise termed ‘Portrait of a Woman’ or ‘Ideal Portrait of a Courtesan as Flora’.

²³⁶ In a letter after reading some sections of the draft volume (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng lett.d.408, fol.59)

²³⁷ Saville explores how ‘*La Gioconda*’ operates the apparently feminist trope of withholding in ‘Poetic Imagining’.

²³⁸ l.2, l.8, l.15

(imagined) present and participates in her “desperate joy” at her own beauty and fear in the knowledge that “her grace must pass”.²³⁹ As Michael Field imagine her, insistent, timeless and strong, the subject arranges herself to be painted; she is moved not by the artist’s directions (for he is absent in this poem), but only by “the prompting of her strange, emphatic insight true”.²⁴⁰ Despite her appearance making her a ‘blank canvas’—“her leftward smile endows / The gazer with no tidings from the face”, and she is a “fair, blank form”—Michael Field claim to access her subjectivity.²⁴¹ Whereas the art-object offers “no tidings”, the poem probes her interiority in a way that, Michael Field suggest, the painting (and her face in life) could not.²⁴²

In this poem, then, Michael Field make known their experience of an observer effect but also sternly fix the painting’s subject in her present tense. Lucrezia has repeated the depicted moment “for centuries”, in this case holding “the fading field-flowers in her hand”.²⁴³ The gerund might animate the scene and make room for an observer effect and future meanings, albeit in a mode of decline, of “fading”, except that it takes place immediately after the poem transitions from being one about a ‘scene’ to one about a ‘painting’ by confirming “So was she painted”.²⁴⁴ This representation of the subject in a state of perpetual decline again calls to mind Michael Field’s short essay, ‘Effigies’: “it is through art alone that a mortal can put on immortality, and yet remain in the world of creatures”, expressing (or rather transmitting) past meanings forever.²⁴⁵ To Michael Field, the subject of ‘*A Portrait*’ is of that particular class of mortals, having purposefully appropriated the medium’s capacity for storage to “put on immortality”. Their Lucrezia is:

... the courtesan who planned
 To give her fragile shapeliness to art, whose reason spanned
 Her doom, who bade her beauty in its cold
 And vacant eminence persist for all men to behold!²⁴⁶

²³⁹ l. 12, l. 10

²⁴⁰ l. 26

²⁴¹ ll. 3-4, l. 42

²⁴² l. 1

²⁴³ ll. 29-30

²⁴⁴ l. 29

²⁴⁵ p. 89

²⁴⁶ ll. 32-5

Michael Field are committed to maintaining the dominance of those supposed past meanings, concealing the fact that they are actually future meanings produced through their observer effect.

Fraser reads 'A *Portrait*' as "stress[ing] the autonomy of the art object and of the woman who is its" "active subject", but nevertheless suggests that the painting's subject requires Michael Field "to envoice the image and make a narrative for her". That is to say, Fraser attempts to give both medium and observer agency, while implicitly acknowledging the role of Michael Field's observer effect in producing a future meaning for the art-object that is, in her words, "the observer of the image in the mirror transfer[ring] the labour of vision" to the observer who encounters the painting. Fraser suggests that the portrait "signifies, not by its inherent meaning," that is to say, by past meanings inherent in its visual data, "but rather by its vacancy, an emptying out of meaning that the viewer of the painting must labour to re-inscribe".²⁴⁷ That is to say, she interprets the art-object, as Michael Field describe it, as demanding an act of recursion and a subsequent creation of future meaning, an observer effect. What she does not note is that it is Michael Field's observer effect that is presented as essential, and *only* theirs. It is crucial to the aims of the poem that the reader is conscious that the poem stands between him and the painting, and that in turn the painting stands between the poem and the supposedly active subject "envoice[d]" by Michael Field. Thain has focused on the affinity thus created between the poem and painting, with both "seek[ing] to extract ... beauty and preserve it in the realm of art and artifice".²⁴⁸ However, this omits the fact that Michael Field propose to preserve the meaning of that beauty, once and for all. Michael Field's Lucrezia does not haunt us in the way that a similar character, Medea da Carpi, haunts Vernon Lee's short fiction from the vantage point of a strikingly similar portrait.²⁴⁹ It is Michael Field's cultural technique of encounter that is at the forefront here, and not Lucrezia at all.

The shortest and last of this group of liminal poems, '*Saint Katharine*', is almost entirely written in the present tense, which flattens any possible structure

²⁴⁷ 'A Visual Field', pp.567-8

²⁴⁸ Thain, '*Michael Field*', p.227

²⁴⁹ 'Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka', in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, 2nd edition (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1906), pp.3-58 (p.32-3)

of past, present and future meaning by admitting only of the art-object's eternal present. The poem is concerned with the ability of art-objects not only to store but also to transmit a single scene, to transmit synchronic data diachronically. Whilst St Katharine "stands" and the "open landscape glows", the core of the poem—literally and metaphorically—is the fact that "though a thousand years she has been dead", the scene is always the same, and she "bleeds each day as on the day she bled".²⁵⁰ Like the subject of 'A Portrait', Katherine's experience is repetitive and unending. The infelicities of the line, with its four stop consonants, reflect a stricture of form (a rhyme for "dead" is sought), but also an abruptness in how the painting stores data about a single moment in time. The chiasmic structure of the line places the present-tense and past-tense conjugations in tension. "Each day", each *today*, is "the day", *that* day on which the event took place. Michael Field's poem seeks to fix the moment of the scene and the moment of the art-object's encounter simultaneously.

As Michael Field describe it, the artist has captured and immortalised St Katharine's pain such that her real death is no protection; her fingers continue to "shrink" from the "spikes of steel".²⁵¹ Yet, there is something zombie-like about this representation; although it indicates St Katharine's enduring, timeless faith,²⁵² it also reduces the potency of that faith by figuring her as a sort of revenant. Her finer emotions are dulled—"the mouth will never feel / Pity again"—and her physical beauty is diminished: her "pure, gold cheeks are blanched", her eyes covered by "a cloudy seal", her hair "spread" and "damp with sweat".²⁵³ The poem re-enacts what Michael Field see as the painting's deanimation of St Katharine, reflected in the fact that the poem is one of the few single sonnets in the volume, leaving her diminished within the art-object, capable only of suffering. It having been established that she bleeds, St

²⁵⁰ ll.2, l.12, ll.4-5

²⁵¹ ll.3-4

²⁵² Michael Field's religiosity became a gradual feature of their aestheticism as they became increasingly attracted to Catholicism at the end of the nineteenth century, and eventually converted. Although there is not space to explore the theme here, see, for example, Thain's "Damnable Aestheticism" and the Turn to Rome: John Gray, Michael Field and a Poetics of Conversion', in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), pp.311-36 on Michael Field within a circle of aesthetes drawn towards Catholicism in the *fin de siècle*, and Alex Murray's 'Recusant Poetics: Rereading Catholicism at the *Fin de Siècle*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 56.3 (2013), 355-73.

²⁵³ ll.6-9

Katharine all but disappears from the poem, replaced by individual body parts—“cheeks”, “eyes”, “mouth”, “hairs”—that are more alive than she, and the final third of the poem discusses her clothing and the scenery of the painting with the woman present only as a spatial reference: “her shoulder” and “behind her to the right”.²⁵⁴ Michael Field’s poetic recursion contains no future meaning, allows no observer effect that might release St Katharine creatively, in fact declaring it to be impossible.

In these transitions between a liminal scene, an overtly liminal painting, and a more subtly liminal painting, we can feel the effect of Michael Field’s didactic efforts. While ‘*Spring*’ appears to toy with opening up the possibility of future meanings by allowing Venus—and through her eyes, the observer—to imagine the moment after the painting’s scene, the poets’ point of view dominates. ‘*A Portrait*’ reflects on the importance of a suspended scene, the visual content of the art-object that is the pinnacle of aspiration for the subject who wishes to be painted, but even here foregrounds Michael Field’s cultural technique of encounter. ‘*Saint Katharine*’ then sternly emphasises the painting’s pause, its eternal present and the lack of future meanings, by reflecting on the continuous, unending nature of the art-object’s data transmission. ‘*Saint Katharine*’ represents a final closing down of possible observer effects, an act of restraint, then. The observer is learning to temper his imaginative encounters.

These poems open out upon a scene poem, the first of two poems about images of Saint Sebastian, and then the volume’s last pure painting poem, ‘*A Sant’ Imagine*’. That final painting poem comes as a reminder that, while absorption by scenic content may provoke Michael Field’s observer effect, it is the art-object that ostensibly retains primacy and “sings for itself”, according to their cultural technique’s operational script. Following ‘*A Sant’ Imagine*’, the remainder of the volume is devoted to scene and liminal scene poems, with only one liminal painting poem, to which we shall return. At the precise mid-point of the volume comes ‘Piero di Cosimo’s *Death of Procris*’. It follows ‘*Venus and Mars*’, which I also classify as a liminal scene, but I turn to ‘*Procris*’ because it is perhaps the most tenuous of all my classifications, as it can be classed as liminal on the basis of one single verb, a test of whether the

²⁵⁴ II.12-3

observer who follows their encounters can combine his sense of both form and content.²⁵⁵

In terms of verb tense, this poem has a similar structure to '*A Portrait*': it begins in the present, setting the scene visually before slipping into the past tense, the background to the static moment that is the subject of the art-object. "And thus", a third of the way through the poem, returns us to the present of the scene.²⁵⁶ In some ways, Procris resembles St Katharine: "lifelessly she bleeds / From throat and dabbled hand", although "Time has been passing since she last drew breath".²⁵⁷ There is something supernatural in the figure of Procris as she lies on the boundary of dying and dead, but at this juncture there is nothing conclusive within the poem that tells the reader that the object of contemplation is a painting, rather than the authors' imagined view of Procris' death.

The only determinative signal within the poem that it relates to the encounter of an art-object is the line "Two figures at her head and feet are seen".²⁵⁸ The participle "seen" indicates that the scene is being observed from outside, reorientating the reader. The focus of that line is not the presence of the dog and faun—the participle "stood" would serve for such a purpose—but on the relative position of a privileged, external observer viewing the grief of the two creatures who watch Procris' death from within the scene. In contrast to the decisive description given by the poem about the circumstances of Procris' death, the faun's "mellow eye / Is indecisive".²⁵⁹ Contrasted against the understanding of the scene by the poets and observer, the dog and faun "have each a like expression of amaze / And deep, / Respectful yearning".²⁶⁰ The emotional—and aesthetic—responses of Michael Field to the grievous scene are privileged by contrast with the baser animal responses of the mourners within the painting itself.

Like ever-bleeding St Katharine and Procris, or eternal Lucrezia, in the art-object "these two watchers pass / Out of themselves" into an "incomprehensible, half-wakened pain"; they are paralysed by their emotional

²⁵⁵ pp.47-52

²⁵⁶ l.31

²⁵⁷ ll.44-5, l.21

²⁵⁸ l.47

²⁵⁹ ll.58-9

²⁶⁰ ll.63-5

response to the encounter such that “They cannot think nor weep / Above this perished jealousy and woe”, “But with vague souls they sit / And gaze” at the dead, objectified Procris whilst the rest of the natural world, “tide and bloom and bird”, continues on with life.²⁶¹ Michael Field imagine a long time-horizon for this mourning that is predicated on an art-object’s form. Whilst “autumn comes” within the scene, the two—the poem imagines—will sit beside Procris as “Red tassels” “Till windy snows appear”.²⁶² The word “tassel”, though often associated with soft furnishings, seems to make more sense here in its meaning as a piece of stone or wood that supports the end of a beam or joist. The poem interprets the two internal observers, and through them the dead body of Procris, architecturally, and in doing so calls attention to the monumental nature of the art-object on the wall. The *Stimmung* of fixity that pervades the scene of the “grey” lifeless form of Procris and her transfixed observers draws additional strength from the art-object’s form.

This architectural, static view of an art-object’s content is emphasised in the poem that follows, ‘Cosimo Tura’s *Saint Jerome in the Desert*’, which is all scene, but in which Michael Field nevertheless meditate on the operations of the art-object.²⁶³ The key metaphor here comes in the first paragraph, when the poem describes St Jerome’s foot “that rather seems to be / The clawed base of a pillar past all date / Than prop of flesh and bone”.²⁶⁴ This is continued throughout the poem, as we see in the later description of his arm, with “tendons ... strong / As rods”.²⁶⁵ As in ‘*Procris*’, there is something architectural or sculptural in how Michael Field understand the painting and Cosimo Tura’s depiction of St Jerome. The affiliation of the saint with stonework guides the second stanza: “Grey are the hollowed rocks, grey is his head / And grey his beard”, “formal and as dread / As some Assyrian’s on a monument”.²⁶⁶ As in ‘*Procris*’, another observer is made available within the scene, with which to compare our responses: the “night-owl, set athwart a rock-bound tree” who

²⁶¹ ll.65-72

²⁶² ll.89-90

²⁶³ pp.53-7

²⁶⁴ ll.5-7

²⁶⁵ ll.42-3

²⁶⁶ ll.11-3

“rolls pertinacious eyes”, unmoved at the saint’s self-flagellation.²⁶⁷ Michael Field use these two devices implicitly to support the outcome of their own observer effect, the poem, as a final, monolithic, and ‘right’ way of seeing.

So far, then, we have seen how the opening poems of the volume—‘*L’Indifferent*’, ‘*Venus, Mercury and Cupid*’, and ‘*Roses and Violets*’—offer some guidelines to the reader about encountering art-objects and viewing their visual contents either as absorbing scenes or as physical objects at a remove from the observer, which perhaps tell a quick dramatic tale or convey a message of artistic genius’ qualities of passion and love. Both sorts of poem may emphasise the poets’ observer effects, but neither seems to invite the reader to have his own. ‘*The Faun’s Punishment*’ is our first liminal poem, and although it appears to open a dialogue between the reader and the art-object, within which the observer effect might take place, Michael Field again impose a definitive interpretation by the end of the poem. A few poems later, an eddy of poems—‘*Spring*’, ‘*A Portrait*’, and ‘*Saint Katharine*’—test the reader’s ability to disable or restrain his observer effect in order to see ‘more clearly’, in accordance with the objectivist project in which Michael Field wish to school him. A reminder of the art-object’s place on the wall shortly follows in ‘*A Sant’ Imagine*’. Precisely midway through the volume comes a liminal poem, ‘*Procris*’, that tests that awareness in the reader, and the following scene poem, ‘*Saint Jerome*’, deploys similar architectural metaphors to remind the reader of the volume’s *Stimmung* of fixity, and its final interpretations of the art-objects he encounters ekphrastically, situating that fixity as a truth of the art-objects themselves.

The preponderance of scene or liminal scene poems in the second half of the volume suggests a greater absorption of the observer by the art-objects’ visual content, and an expectation of a greater sensitivity on his part to distinctions of phrasing that suggest a material art-object and the sort of encounter that Michael Field enacted: sitting and absorbing everything of note about the art-object. After ‘*Procris*’, the next liminal scene that tests the reader’s sensitivity is ‘Giorgione’s *Shepherd Boy*’, followed a few poems later by ‘*A Pen Drawing of Leda*, by Sodoma’.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ ll.52-3

²⁶⁸ pp.65-8, p.81

'*Shepherd Boy*' draws upon a range of metaphors that call attention to the mode of painting. The boy is situated on a "ground" and described with reference to "line" and "modulation", all of which are reminiscent of prose art criticism and suggest a painting being described, rather than an imagined scene.²⁶⁹ The poem concludes by describing the boy as a mere emblem, rather than an individual, "youth", and not a youth.²⁷⁰ While Michael Field's observer effect imagines a variety of qualities about the boy, they are not individualised but idealised, and Michael Field disavow any act of recursion on their own part. Rather, in an apostrophe, they suggest that the figure has been summoned by a recursion of "time" itself, which has "run back / And fetched [the boy] for our eyes" in the poem's present.²⁷¹ Such mystification seeks to divert the observer from recognising Michael Field's observer effects, and instead to believe them to be "objective" truth. Meanwhile, '*Leda*' is more tentatively liminal. The opening "'Tis" that represents her as a thing apart to be observed is a softer version of the "here" noted in "*Venus, Mercury and Cupid*".²⁷² Although not an adverb of place, "'Tis" still provokes that ekphrastic slowing noted by Cunningham, drawing attention to itself as a moment of ekphrasis. The repetition of "drawing" and "draw" in the first stanza is an undercurrent for the sensitive reader to detect.²⁷³

However, I want to move on from these reminders, dotted amongst poems of the second half of the volume, to the final cluster of liminal poems at the volume's end, which includes '*A Pietà*, by Carlo Crivelli', the only liminal painting poem of that half.²⁷⁴ This poem is preceded by a liminal scene poem, '*Giorgione's The Sleeping Venus*', which has featured widely in recent criticism of *Sight and Song* because of its potential for feminist and lesbian readings.²⁷⁵ Angela Leighton, for example, suggests that the poem "shows the extent to which art for art's sake" and its "implication of pleasure for pleasure's sake" had "freed Michael Field from a female heritage of repressed or displaced

²⁶⁹ l.4, l.13, l.15

²⁷⁰ l.58

²⁷¹ ll.48-9

²⁷² l.1

²⁷³ l.2, l.7

²⁷⁴ pp.106-11

²⁷⁵ p.98-105

eroticism”.²⁷⁶ However, while this may be true for Michael Field, they do not extend that freedom of thought to the reader, who instead is invited to accept whatever eroticism their poem contains wholesale, protected as it is, by and large, through the indentation of each stanza’s final octet.

In ‘*Sleeping Venus*’, Michael Field repeat the emphasis on the existence—and metaphorical presence—of the art-object that helps them generate a *Stimmung* of fixity. The opening words, resembling those of ‘*Venus, Mercury and Cupid*’, are “Here is Venus”,²⁷⁷ establishing the poem as an encounter that mimics the authors’ own: in their diary, Cooper records, of a visit on 10 August 1891, “And there she is – Giorgione’s Venus!”.²⁷⁸ The adverbs of place situate the art-object’s content in relation to the observer, who has come before (as in the poem) or come across (as in the diary) the art-object in order to encounter it. However, the opening of the poem is reticent when it comes to answering the question: ‘Is this poem about a painting?’ Michael Field refer obliquely to Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (the subject of an earlier poem), saying, “She has left her archèd shell, / Has left the barren wave that foams”,²⁷⁹ but the poem *could* still be interpreted as a scene until the final stanza, when the presence of the art-object becomes undeniable in the meditation that:

... while we gaze it seems as though
She had lain thus the solemn glebes among
In the ages far ago
And would continue, till the long,
Last evening of Earth’s summer glow.²⁸⁰

Once again, the art-object is invoked to authorise or validate the *Stimmung* of fixity and the finality of Michael Field’s observer effect that reflects Venus as a perpetual and monumental part of the landscape, rather than simply having taken a moment’s rest at a spot she will never visit again. This is effected both stylistically and representationally, with the poem mimicking the presentation of Venus by Giorgione. In the second stanza, the poem reflects on

²⁷⁶ *Victorian Women Poets: Writing against the Heart* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.215

²⁷⁷ l.1

²⁷⁸ Add MS 46779, fol.68^r

²⁷⁹ ll.4-5

²⁸⁰ ll.114-8

the painter's treatment of Venus in the same way as the background scenery, flattening both so that they have "[t]he same extensive smoothness" in their respective "curves" and "swerves", the rhyme scheme tightening the parallel.²⁸¹ This "sympathy" between Venus and the landscape is echoed in Michael Field's own description of Venus' body:²⁸²

... from the elbow raised aloft
Down to the crossing knees a line descends
Unimpeachable and soft
As the adjacent slope that ends
In chequered plain of hedge and croft.²⁸³

Michael Field's metaphor describing the "line"—a term also used in '*Shepherd Boy*'—formed by Venus' body as sharing the (imagined) tactile characteristics of the scenery in the painting is the first of several. The following stanzas address compositional elements of the painting, many of which were factually recorded in the diary's prose notes: "circular" breasts, "in contour" or "in round"; another "line" "from hip to herbage-cushioned foot"; both her body and the painting's "hillock" have "heaves"; and references to the left and right of Venus' body creep in repeatedly in order to depict accurately the image in the frame.²⁸⁴ The poem's diction takes on common elements of an art exhibition guidebook, and Venus is presented within the painted scene as a further, self-referential art-object; her "raised arm ... frames her hair", and her face is an "oval space".²⁸⁵

'*The Sleeping Venus*' therefore objectifies the sleeping woman in a way that makes use of the implied presence of the art-object in order to restrain the image of Venus in the reader's mind's eye. It is as though careful reflection on the art-object suggested certain tools of language to Michael Field with which they reproduce the erotic effect on the viewer of encountering the art-object, through which they may watch Venus sleep, but do little more. As in '*Saint*

²⁸¹ ll.15-7

²⁸² l.20

²⁸³ ll.30-4

²⁸⁴ l.35, l.39, l.58, l.73, l.45. Cooper records that "the curve from the elbows to the knees has the extensive softness of undulating land" (Add MS 46779, fol.68^r). Bradley notes (according to Cooper, who records her thoughts) that "[t]here is nothing rustic in this picture. It is only Italian landscape that could thus take flesh in a Venus" (fol.69^r). The idea that the landscape has become Venus, rather than housing her, is reflected in the poem's *Stimmung*, which deanimates the female figure.

²⁸⁵ l.72, l.77

Katharine', the poem seems to lose its narrative tension in its final turn to less crucial details. Here, for example, Michael Field eschew a further exploration of Venus' autoerotic pleasure in favour of contemplating the "dun grasses".²⁸⁶ Further observer effects, including those that might be more actively sexual, are not encouraged. We might compare the poem with Swinburne's 'Hermaphroditus', which also provides an erotic description of an art-object featuring a sleeping deity.²⁸⁷ Yet Swinburne's poem focuses, stanza by stanza, on the sleeping figure and its eroticism, while Michael Field's exhibits an unwillingness to leave any piece of visual data untransposed, at the expense of any truly erotic experience.

In 'A *Pietà*', which follows, we again see how Michael Field view the whole scene as a composition, not a fact of lived experience. Midway through the poem, they note that:

Yet there is such subtle intercourse between
The hues and the passion is so frank
One is soothed, one feels it good
To be of this little group
Of mourners close to the rank.²⁸⁸

In focusing on the use of colours in contrast, Michael Field apply an art critic's eye to an art-object's visual effects. In placing us in the "little group" at the front of the scene, they situate us firmly in front of the art-object, which we are told feels "good", not owing to its content or message, but owing to its execution.

Whereas other poems, such as 'A *Portrait*', seem to revel in what has been called "envoicing", 'A *Pieta*' highlights the muteness of the characters at hand. The Virgin has "open ... lips", but they are "stiffened" also, not mobile in a way suggestive of expression, and similar to the lips of the dead Christ, which "for breath / Leave room", although only "as a house-door left ajar / From which the owner of the house has started".²⁸⁹ This importance of visual over auditory data—the production of the latter by an observer effect from encountering the former—is repeated in the figure of John, whose "waiting face" precedes his

²⁸⁶ l.92

²⁸⁷ *Poems and Ballads* (London: Moxon, 1866), pp.79-81

²⁸⁸ ll.40-5

²⁸⁹ l.3, ll.22-3, ll.25-6

“shriek”.²⁹⁰ Meanwhile, the Virgin’s “face”, and not the air around her, “is full of cries”, emphasising that visual data are all we have as observers of an art-object, until, Michael Field having described the prospect of the resurrection, “she laughs”, almost as though at their prompting.²⁹¹ The poem thus blends together the past and imagined future meanings of Michael Field’s observer effect.

However, their description of Mary Magdalen, while similarly revealing their observer effect, issues a warning to the reader. Mary is a “dumb” and “silent creature”, notwithstanding the “promise” of her “vigilant features”.²⁹² That she retains her silence with “sealed / Lips and hard patience”, unlike the Virgin’s eventual “laugh” and John’s “shriek”, means that it is to her that the resurrection is first revealed.²⁹³ There is something metatextual here. The Magdalen seems to enact—in Michael Field’s observer effect—the form of encounter as cultural technique that they advocate: her art-object is the body of Christ, and her silent, patient watchfulness reveals all. The reader is warned against letting his impulses run away with him: “The dead, if indeed we would win them back / Must be won in their own love’s larger fashion”.²⁹⁴ The observer’s impulses and imagination are to be suppressed.

This pair of liminal poems proves the final test of the volume, with the last two poems pure scenes. The coda of ‘Watteau’s *L’Embarquement Pour Cythère*’ ends the volume with a subtle reiteration of Michael Field’s twin goals: to write themselves into aesthetic critical discourse and to distinguish their own mode of encounter.²⁹⁵ That painting had been the subject of several prior poems, including Charles Baudelaire’s ‘Un Voyage à Cythère’, and its deep intertextuality makes it a fitting end. As Matthew Potolsky notes, the poem “constitutes a miniature decadent canon” with the poets “writ[ing] themselves into a procession of decadent precursors drawn to Watteau” while also “appropriat[ing] the stance of the cynical observer” finding “new perspectives in

²⁹⁰ l.54, l.55

²⁹¹ l.5, l.11

²⁹² l.60, ll.63-5

²⁹³ ll.85-6

²⁹⁴ ll.90-1

²⁹⁵ pp.117-25

a recognizable 'library' of decadent classics".²⁹⁶ Vadillo has called the italicised, six-line coda an "anticlimatic afterthought to the painting" in which Michael Field "rewrite the painting and the collection" with Venus as "the ironical gazer, the player of the game", still "looking ironically at us" after the "crowd has left".²⁹⁷ This echoes their imagining of Venus' future vision in '*Spring*' and highlights that the observer effect is not for us, as readers, but a possession of the poets who believe themselves to have uncovered the transparent truth in each art-object. This disenfranchisement of the observer at the volume's end should, however, prove no surprise.

Conclusion

My linear reading of *Sight and Song* thus illustrates the *Stimmung* of fixity that pervades it, and Michael Field's assertion of the enduring validity of their own observer effects. For Michael Field, the cultural technique of encountering an art-object was heavily focused on correctly identifying its past meaning: painter, provenance, and the aesthetically 'correct' interpretation (usually that of noted male art critics). Michael Field sought to appropriate that position and include those past and present meanings, and their own observer effects, in their poems while rejecting the need for others to experience their own observer effects. As Vicinus has suggested, "their aesthetic" in the volume "asserted the primacy of the artist over the critic, of Michael Field over Berenson".²⁹⁸ The *Stimmung* of their work is of there being a 'right' answer, and it finally being theirs. The observer who encounters the art-objects through their ekphrasis is, then, very clearly just a witness.

Although this chapter has focused predominantly on the poems in *Sight and Song* that reflect the flux between absorption by content and attending to a painting *qua* painting, many of the characteristics that I have identified as part of their *Stimmung* of fixity are present in the poems not touched upon here. For example, the suspension of a woman's happy life, "mingl[ing] with her friends"

²⁹⁶ *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardesley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp.101-2

²⁹⁷ p.32

²⁹⁸ "'Sister Souls'", p.336

and “liv[ing] for their sake alone”, that takes place in the art-object’s eternal present is re-enacted in ‘Timoteo Viti’s *Magdalen*’: “Now she must stand all day on lithe, unsummoned feet”.²⁹⁹ The architectural firmness that I have identified in ‘*Procris*’ and ‘*Saint Jerome*’ is found too in ‘Antonello da Messina’s *Saint Sebastian*’, where Sebastian’s figure is “rigid by the rigid trunk” that “lifts its column on the blue” of the sky, and “his form” is “almost firm as sculpture”, “shin[ing] as olive marble”.³⁰⁰ Example upon example could be found. The *Stimmung* I have identified is a feature of the volume as a whole.

Nevertheless, it is in the shifts between scene, painting and liminal poems that Michael Field are most explicitly didactic, and that their volume functions most clearly as a guidebook, with them positioned as authorities. Vicinus has argued that, in *Sight and Song*, Michael Field “urge the reader to enter empathically into the life of each painting” and “to experience ... an imaginative response to a work of art”.³⁰¹ This seems to suggest that Michael Field set out with each poem to provoke an observer effect—“an imaginative response”—in their readers, but I hope that the readings set out above demonstrate that this is not strictly accurate. I would suggest that, in contrast to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose work I address in the next chapter, and who *does*, I argue, always seek to provoke an observer effect, Michael Field assert the rectitude of their own imaginative responses and forestall the reader’s imaginative production of future meanings as part of their lessons to him about how to use his eyes. The ‘Preface’ claims that the cultural technique of encountering an art-object is not so much an operation, a process in which the art-object and its content are “manipulated” and future meanings produced, but a method of creative submission. While Michael Field purport to have submitted entirely to the art-objects in question, the reader is expected to submit entirely to their writings. The “empathic” recursion that Michael Field invite is thus one of empathy towards *their* interpretations and impressions, which they claim “objectively” describe the “life of each painting”.

That Michael Field resisted the imaginative addition of something new by the observer, by their readers, is, I suggest, one of the reasons why *Sight and*

²⁹⁹ pp.75-80 (l.42, l.44, l.50)

³⁰⁰ pp.69-74 (ll.2-3, l.37, l.43)

³⁰¹ “‘Sister Souls’”, p.335

Song received a tepid response amongst critics and Bradley and Cooper's circle, reflected in their fear that the "Song" of the volume "soon fade[d] away". John M. Gray, curator of the Edinburgh Gallery, was described by Michael Field as "reject[ing]" "The Theory of Sight & Song" and being "more than luke-warm over the book", although he had written quite positively in his review in the *Academy*.³⁰² As Fraser notes, Berenson's initial response to the volume, in a letter from Easter Sunday 1892, was supportively enthusiastic, but he was "more critical ... later when they were together in Paris", in part at Bradley and Cooper's prompting.³⁰³ His early praise of the "precision and quality" of the poems' descriptions is suggestive of his subsequent aesthetic criticisms.³⁰⁴ W.B. Yeats' highly critical review in *The Bookman* perhaps sums up the difficulties that many found with the volume. He deemed *Sight and Song* "thoroughly unsatisfactory" and a "sheer guidebook", criticising Michael Field for allowing "the critical faculty [to] do the work of the creative".³⁰⁵ Although Thain argues that Michael Field "disdain" the "sub-ekphrastic experiment" of "abstracting content" from one form and projecting it into another, there are many cases in which this is precisely how Michael Field proceed, and it was certainly how the volume was initially perceived.³⁰⁶

A comment resembling Yeats' criticism hints that producing a didactic guidebook was, in fact, Michael Field's intention: "Jan. 7. Saturday. In the Athenaeum, under Recent verse (bless the mark!) Sight & Song is described as 'a magnificent catalogue!!' Capital & concise criticism!"³⁰⁷ Embracing such commentary was not merely a post-hoc rationalisation of the volume's

³⁰² Letter of 29 May 1892, quoted in Ivor C. Treby's *Binary Star*. Although "more than luke-warm" is somewhat ambiguous, in context it seems safe to read Gray's thinking—as it seemed to Bradley at that time—as more "luke" and less "warm".

³⁰³ 'A Visual Field', p.560

³⁰⁴ Letter on 30 May 1892, reproduced in Thain and Vadillo p.320

³⁰⁵ 'Review of *Sight and Song*', *The Bookman*, 2 (July 1892), 116. It should be noted that Yeats was nonetheless in general an admirer of Michael Field's early work. Kelsey William has recently examined their influence on him in greater detail ("Copied without loss": Michael Field's Poetic Influence on the Work of W.B. Yeats', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 40.1 (2016), 128-46). In *Victorian Glassworlds. Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Isobel Armstrong echoes Yeats' criticism by linking the volume with "noir poems" (p.353), which "replicate the effect" of art photographs and were popular with late-nineteenth-century art connoisseurs "to complement the Continental art tourism industry" (Thain and Vadillo in *Michael Field, The Poet*, p.39).

³⁰⁶ 'Michael Field', p.71

³⁰⁷ *Works and Days*, vol. 6, London, British Library, Add MS 46781, fol.3^r

reception. Prior to *Sight and Song*'s publication, in correspondence with Costelloe, Bradley remarked: "you know how often the notes to a book may be of quite rare value. Think what it would be to make perfect guidebooks". At the end of such a guidebook, Bradley argues, "the impression must be that you are brimfull [*sic*] of your subject (as you are) but that you leave your student to look & think for himself, having taught him the use of his eyes".³⁰⁸ Although Bradley was writing expressly of Costelloe's latest project, it is difficult to imagine that such sentiments did not influence *Sight and Song*, then under revision, or that leaving the observer the use of his eyes according to a prescribed cultural technique of encounter was not at the heart of that volume.

³⁰⁸ Letter reproduced in *Michael Field, The Poet*, pp.327-8

Chapter 2

The visionary (description of the) encounter: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's invitation

*Turn not the prophet's page, O Son! He knew
All that thou hast to suffer, and hath writ.
Not yet thine hour of knowledge.³⁰⁹*

Despite making his living primarily from painting, poetry was Dante Gabriel Rossetti's first love as an art form, and in a letter to Gordon Hake, he wrote that he wished to be considered "primarily" a poet because his "poetic tendencies" imbued his paintings with their value.³¹⁰ Therefore, I propose that it is from his poetry that we can best derive the "operational script" of any Rossettian cultural technique of encounter.³¹¹ While Michael Field's *Sight and Song* positioned them as tutors, Rossetti's ekphrastic poetry often appears to place him in the position of "prophet", metaphorically reading the meanings of art-objects and literally writing them in order to pass on his "hour[s] of knowledge". Indeed, Catherine Maxwell has suggested that, in his frequent revisions of previous works, Rossetti sought "to reveal their concealed premonitory meaning".³¹² However, I argue that reading such determinism into Rossetti's recursive creative process—and its "predefined variation[s]"—is an error that attributes far more control to Rossetti as artist-author than he himself would grant.³¹³ To interpret Rossetti as a "prophet" obscures both the creative, visionary work that he demands of the observer, and the general means by which the observer effect allows us to retrieve "premonitory" visions of the future

³⁰⁹ 'For the Holy Family: By Michelangelo (In the National Gallery)', *Ballads and Sonnets* (London: F.S. Ellis, 1881), p.311 (ll.1-3)

³¹⁰ *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 4, ed. by William E. Fredeman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004) 70.110, pp.449-51

³¹¹ Cornelia Vismann, 'Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty', trans. by Ilinca Iurascu, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 83-93 (p.87)

³¹² *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p.40

³¹³ Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, 'Siren recursions', in *Kittler Now*, ed. by Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury (Cambridge: Polity, 2015) pp.71-94 (p.74)

from the past without either annihilating their former meanings or holding those meanings sacred.³¹⁴

In this chapter, I focus on Rossetti's late work that forms a part of discourse network 1890, and in particular on five ekphrastic poems from *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881).³¹⁵ Unlike in the preceding chapter, I do not propose to read *Ballads* as a whole as a commentary on the cultural technique of encountering art-objects. It is a diverse volume, featuring a broad range of genres and themes. Rather, I turn to a set of poems about art-objects written between 1870 and 1880: 'For Spring, by Sandro Botticelli (*In the Accademia of Florence*)'; 'William Blake (To Frederick Shields, on his Sketch of Blake's Work-Room and Death-Room, 3, Fountain Court, Strand)'; 'A Sea-Spell (For a Picture)'; 'Fiammetta. For a Picture'; and 'The Day-Dream (For a Picture)'.³¹⁶

In close reading these poems, I seek to develop Elizabeth Helsinger's conclusion that Rossetti worked to renew poetry through paintings and drawings by examining the limits that such poems set on the control of either the artist or author on how an observer encounters an ekphrased art-object.³¹⁷ In particular, I note how these poems use what J. Hillis Miller calls a "divided moment" to situate the observer where she may view both past and future meanings, confronting her with Rossetti's recursion to a trope or specific art-object but withholding any definitive interpretation by him.³¹⁸ I also propose how

³¹⁴ Read with her argument that Rossetti tried to thwart his "anxieties about being absorbed" by art and the image of the beloved "to the point of paralysis" by applying the mask of beauty to the threatening female figure, Maxwell's suggestion appears to be that Rossetti's recursions to images of the *femme fatale* are intended to reveal layers of meaning that he had deliberately obscured, as though his recursions are a form of sub-conscious Russian roulette (*Second Sight*, pp.43-4). Although interesting from a biographical perspective, it does not offer a fruitful avenue for pursuing how art-objects operate in Rossetti's work.

³¹⁵ *Ballads* was published shortly after Rossetti's revised edition of *Poems* (*Poems: A New Edition* (London: F.S. Ellis, 1881)). Although the latter contains several poems on art-objects, the bulk of Rossetti's later writings are contained in *Ballads*, and so I focus on this final volume.

³¹⁶ p.312; p.314; p.328; p.329; p.330. These poems appear in the 'Sonnets' section of the volume, separated from Rossetti's highly personal sonnet sequence 'The House of Life' by 'Lyrics'. Over half form part of a Rossettian double-work, the exceptions being 'For Spring' and 'William Blake', which treat art-objects by other artists. The poems are spread within 'Sonnets', suggesting—along with the fact that some of his other poems about art-objects were placed in *Poems*—that Rossetti did not intend them to be read as a cohesive group. Nevertheless, I address the poems sequentially, on the (perhaps tenuous) basis that a reader may have read them thus, moving from the volume's beginning to its end.

³¹⁷ *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008)

³¹⁸ 'The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art', *Victorian Poetry*, 29.4 (1991), 333-49 (p.337)

some of the common themes and tropes of Rossetti's poems—loss, the “stunner”, and the idea of reverie—can be addressed in terms of the observer effect, rather than biographically.

Rossetti and his aesthetic project in discourse network 1890

Much has been written about Rossetti's position within Victorian aesthetic circles of discourse network 1800, with the relationship between Rossetti and his artistic influences,³¹⁹ the sale and marketing of his work,³²⁰ and Rossetti's influence on artists and aesthetes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries³²¹ all proving fruitful lines of inquiry. At first blush, then, it might seem that Rossetti could only be a bit-player in discourse network 1890, as he is of an earlier generation than the other three authors on whom I focus, and he died in 1882. Nevertheless, I argue that Rossetti's later work can and should be addressed as part of discourse network 1890. As David E. Wellbery notes in his *précis* of Kittler's theory of discourse networks, literature “change[s] historically according to the material and technical resources at its disposal”.³²² Far from Rossetti's poetic capabilities falling off as changes to the technical *a priori* happened around him, Walter Pater writes that Rossetti's 1881 *Ballads* “bears witness to the reversal of any failure of power” and a return to “his early

³¹⁹ See, for example, Helsingier's *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*; and Leonée Ormond, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Old Masters', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36.2 (2006), 153-68. More obliquely, see Henry Johnson's 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Japan: The Musical Instrument Depicted in *The Blue Bower* and *A Sea Spell*', *Music in Art*, 30.1-2 (2005), 145-53, and Maxwell's "'Devious Symbols": Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Purgatorio', *Victorian Poetry*, 31.1 (1993), 19-40, which builds on work by Hoxie Neale Fairchilde to provide an interesting analysis of Rossetti's 'The Woodspurge' as inspired by Gerard's *Herball* (1597).

³²⁰ See, for example, John Barclay's 'Consuming Artifacts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Aesthetic Economy', *Victorian Poetry*, 35.1 (1997), 1-21, and Philip McEvansoneya's 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Hamlet and Ophelia" and Its Patron', *Burlington Magazine*, 151 (2009), 219-223

³²¹ See, for example, Henry Treffry Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle, or Cheyne Walk Life*, ed. by Gale Pedrick (London: Elkin Mathews, 1904); John Holmes, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Late Victorian Sonnet Sequence: Sexuality, Belief and the Self* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Elizabeth Prettejohn's *Rossetti and His Circle* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1997); and Jerome McGann's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) rethinks Rossetti's influence on Modernists such as Eliot, Yeats and Pound.

³²² 'Foreword', in Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. by Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp.vii-xxxiii (p.xiii)

standard of literary perfection”, suggesting that Rossetti was as engaged as ever with his medial situation until the very end of his career.³²³

Helsing and Jason R. Rudy have respectively argued for understanding Rossetti’s poetic project—and, incidentally, William Morris’—as responding to changes in the technical *a priori* regarding vision and audition. Helsing suggests that Rossetti sought to “renew” poetry by “rethinking” it through painting and drawing.³²⁴ Rossetti returned to poetry with renewed vigour approximately once a decade over the course of his career,³²⁵ and upon each return, we can understand him as “reshaping” not only the changing “messages” of visual media in his new poems, but also deploying his knowledge of their changing “standards and materials” to shape and reshape his literary approaches.³²⁶ This might be applied not only to painting and drawing, but also to other visual media, such as photography, in which Rossetti had a significant interest, and of which he made extensive use.³²⁷

Following a similar line of thought, Rudy notes that, while Rossetti was understood by his contemporaries in the late-1870s as “reinvigorat[ing] formal structures” and “returning technical dexterity to the fore of poetic composition”, this “return to form” nevertheless “carrie[d] with it unmistakable traces of [Sydney Thompson] Dobell’s physiological aesthetics, the belief that rhythm and meter transmit universal knowledge and feeling with even more ease, in many

³²³ ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti’, in *Appreciations, With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1889), pp.228-42 (p.239)

³²⁴ *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, p.1

³²⁵ Suzanne Waldman identifies Rossetti’s return to poetry in 1859 as a way for him to “revive his powers of expression” (*The Demon and the Damozel: Dynamics of Desire in the Works of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p.91), while J.B. Bullen notes that Rossetti’s return to poetry in 1868, leading to the 1871 *Poems*, was prompted by encouragement from William Bell Scott, and that, when demand for Rossetti’s paintings fell in the late 1870s, he “again dedicated himself to poetry” after encouragement from Hall Caine, Theodore Watts-Dunton and Jane Morris (*Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011), p.203 (citing *Correspondence*, 69.186), p.253).

³²⁶ *Discourse Networks*, p.265

³²⁷ Alicia Craig Faxon details how Rossetti began posing regularly for professional photographs at the latest in 1859 (‘D.G. Rossetti’s Use of Photography’, *History of Photography*, 16.3 (Autumn 1992), 254-62). Helsing notes in *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* how Rossetti directed John Parsons in taking a series of photographs of Jane Morris in his garden in July 1865 as part of “thinking how to paint her” (p.163), and Colin Ford examines the relationship between Rossetti and Parsons in his essay ‘A Pre-Raphaelite Partnership: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Robert Parsons’, *Burlington Magazine*, 146 (2004), 308-18. Rossetti’s interest persisted throughout his life, with McGann detailing how, after 1872, Rossetti began collecting numerous photographs of Michelangelo’s paintings and sculptures, which he used as inspiration for his project of translating Michelangelo’s complete verse (*Game*).

cases, than words on a page”.³²⁸ That is to say, Rossetti also deployed, if not the “messages” of auditory media *per se*, at least the techniques and ideas that such new media had generated with regard to poetry’s aural qualities.

Helsing and Rudy thus demonstrate Rossetti’s active engagement with the medial changes of his technical *a priori*, and how those changes may have influenced his poetry in particular. They also, however, invite us to consider carefully how best to approach his ekphrastic work as enacting a cultural technique relating to the visual medium of painting. Michael Field’s *Sight and Song* was explicit about the form of cultural technique that they advocated. Such a guide does not precede Rossetti’s ekphrastic poetry. Yet, this need not undermine our reading of his poems as staging encounter as a cultural technique “designed to carry out an action that develops cultural efficacy in a specific way through the interplay of purposeful bodily gestures and the use of aids such as tools, instruments or other medial objects”.³²⁹

In the first instance, we may treat Rossetti’s poems as “medial objects” with which the observer interacts, acknowledging her brainwork as bodywork. John Barclay has commented on Rossetti’s view of the poem as “an object”, carefully worked upon and constructed, rather than an event, disdaining the Romantic integration of the process of composition into the text itself and complaining of the “‘modern habit’ of ‘treating material as product’”.³³⁰ In this respect, then, his poetry asks the reader to treat it as an artefact with which to interact, rather than an event to experience temporally. While Michael Field’s ekphrases purported to convey “objectively” the truth of their (supposedly generalisable) experience, Rossetti’s construct an object for the observer to experience that is at a remove from his own experiences.³³¹

As the title of this chapter indicates, I classify Rossetti’s cultural technique of encounter as a visionary one; that is to say, one that not only depends upon the observer’s imaginative work but also seeks actively to

³²⁸ *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), pp.109-10

³²⁹ Markus Krajewski, ‘The Power of Small Gestures: On the Cultural Technique of Service’, trans. by Charles Marcrum, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 94-109 (p.94)

³³⁰ ‘Consuming Artifacts’, p.15, citing T. Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), p.169

³³¹ ‘Preface’, in *Sight and Song* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892), p.v-vi (p.v)

provoke that work. However, this emphasis on inner vision should not obscure the aural qualities of Rossetti's work that contribute to their *demand* for the observer to labour imaginatively by refusing her the capacity to decline to do so. 'Visionary' here denotes having original ideas about the future, that is to say, the future meanings of art-objects, and not merely the use of one's mind's eye.

Jason David Hall has examined the influence of discourse network 1800's acoustic technologies on poetry across that period, arguing that "the complex interplay between metrical abstraction and embodiment" was "central to much verse theory" of discourse network 1890 in particular. He suggests that, at the *fin de siècle*, the "possibilities afforded by the 'new languages of recording instruments'" "enabled a re-conceptualizing of not only the discrete properties of metrical verse—including the ongoing contest between accent and time—but also the practice of scansion".³³² Although Hall does not address Rossetti specifically, and Rossetti's prosody is not experimental, for all its challenges, I propose that his poetry's aural effects invite us to close-read them with a careful ear, as well as a careful eye, for their details.

In particular, I propose that we understand Rossetti's poems as hinging upon Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's insight that poetry acts upon the body "like a touch from inside", owing in particular to its aural qualities.³³³ The apparent sensory confusion of reading and hearing, sound and touch, illustrates the biological grounding for this. To read is, for the majority of readers, to hear something in one's inner voice(s). To hear sound is to interpret with a specialised portion of the body the vibrations that we might feel with any part thereof. Comparing the effect of light on our eyes to its effect on our skin—a gentle warming, if we are lucky enough to sense anything at all—reveals the intimate connection between hearing and feeling, sound and touch, which take place simultaneously within the ear.

While Friedrich Kittler points out how nineteenth-century literature relied upon solitary silent readers functioning as "*camera obscura[s]*",³³⁴ looking in

³³² 'Materializing Meter: Physiology, Psychology, Prosody', *Victorian Poetry*, 49.2 (2011), 179-97 (p.180), citing Thomas L. Hankins and Robert J. Silverman, *Instruments and the Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.9

³³³ *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.40

³³⁴ *Optical Media*, trans. by Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p.139

their ‘mind’s eye’, then, we must also acknowledge his account of the auditory nature of reading, which stimulates the ‘mind’s ear’, producing an “acoustic hallucination”.³³⁵ While any nineteenth-century text might be scrutinised in the context of its “interplay” with both a reader’s trained inner hearing and their trained inner vision, this multi-sensory approach is particularly apposite with regard to Rossetti’s poetry, which pays especial attention to how particular words might “stun” his readers.³³⁶ Rossetti’s poems are thus highly attuned to the production of auditory “neurological sparks”.³³⁷ Understanding Rossetti’s presentation of his poems as crafted objects, then, with effects that play on both the reader’s inner vision(s) and inner voice(s), is key to the visionary encounter that I describe in this chapter.

Rossetti’s recursions

Let us turn to Rossetti’s ekphrases themselves, then. Rossetti’s work was particularly praised by his contemporaries for its recursive nature, with Pater calling Rossetti part of Romanticism’s “second flowering after date”,³³⁸ and Theodore Watts-Dunton arguing that his art had instigated a “Renascence of Wonder”.³³⁹ At the same time, however, the Rossetti Archive notes that

³³⁵ *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.70

³³⁶ As Adrienne Auslander Munich notes in her *Andromeda’s Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), Rossetti can “ma[k]e fascinating” “old romance[s]” such as the myth of Andromeda through his use of “stunning words” (p.87). As early as 1849, Rossetti told his brother, William Michael Rossetti, that he had been “reading up all manner of old romaunts, to pitch upon stunning words for poetry” (cited in *Andromeda’s Chains*, p.86). In thinking about Rossetti’s efforts to “stun” readers of his poems, we might align his craft with that of José Maria de Heredia, who employed exotic names, double rhymes, and words with notable auditory qualities in his sonnets in order to produce certain effects. The two poets share a number of other characteristics, including a preference for the sonnet and a deep interest in Renaissance Italy.

³³⁷ Steven Connor, ‘*Scilicet*: Kittler, Media and Madness’, in *Kittler Now*, ed. by Sale and Salisbury, pp.115-31 (p.120)

³³⁸ ‘Aesthetic Poetry’, in *Appreciations*, pp.213-27 (p.213)

³³⁹ *Poetry and the Renascence of Wonder* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1916). This idea of repetition with a fresh outcome was, perhaps, planted in the minds of critics by Rossetti himself when he proposed the term ‘Brotherhood’ to describe a collective of like-minded artists and poets, suggestive of a spiritual order or group of initiates who shared a common thread whilst being individually varied. Dinah Roe, in her family biography, describes how the name of the group was agreed. Although the group’s various members and affiliates gave different versions of events, “everyone agreed that it was Gabriel who added the word ‘Brotherhood’”. Roe suggests that “it is unsurprising that a man so defined by family should choose this familial designation for his peer group” (*The Rossettis in Wonderland: A Victorian Family History*

Rossetti would “usual[ly]” “read”—the verb is telling—paintings “for [their] contemporary significance”, which he would then set down in a poem, or other written work encapsulating his observer effect.³⁴⁰ So far, so typical for any recursive art. Recursively uncovering the art-object’s prior meaning, its historical context or mythical content, is but one phase of the process of encounter; the moment of encounter is a thick one, encompassing both the ‘just-past’ and the ‘soon-to-be’.

This mirrors Helsinger’s analysis of Rossetti’s sonnets for pictures as “the site of aesthetic double consciousness, half creatively imaginative, half analytic”, incorporating both what Rossetti called an “inner standing point” and “the distance”, medial and temporal, “that separates the modern poet or reader from the art she strives imaginatively to enter”.³⁴¹ This “distance” can be understood as encompassing both the constant changes in our medial circumstances and the “gaps” that result from the poet’s “transposition” of visual data into verbal.³⁴² Meanwhile, the “double consciousness” that Helsinger describes can be interpreted as a sort of uncanny melding of those “gaps” and the “sense of the alien”, the foreign characteristics of the art-object, in the case of ekphrasis.³⁴³ That is to say, Rossetti was skilful at transposing visual content into a verbal medium while maintaining “the internal (syntagmatic and

(London: Haus Publishing, 2011), p.82). The idea of a shared symbolism and returning to past styles and themes, although not necessarily borne out in each Pre-Raphaelite’s work, identifies them as repeating afresh. Indeed, Colin Cruise notes that Rossetti’s own work could hardly be described as objectively pre-Raphaelite in ‘The pre-eminent Pre-Raphaelite: Revisiting Rossetti’, *The Art Book*, 11.4 (2004), 4-7.

³⁴⁰ ‘For the Holy Family by Michelangelo (in the National Gallery)’, *Rossetti Archive*, <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/10-1880.raw.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017] (para. 5 of 10). Barclay also argues that Rossetti “decontextual[ses] and dehistoric[ses] the art objects he contemplates” (‘Consuming Artifacts’, p.3).

³⁴¹ ‘Aesthetics’, in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.444-65 (p.464). McGann notes that Rossetti first uses the phrase “inner standing point” in marginalia relating to his poem ‘Ave’ (‘An Introduction to D.G. Rossetti’, *Nines* <<http://www.nines.org/exhibits/rossettibio?page=6>> [accessed 17 March 2017], para. 2 of 10). Rossetti later used it in his retort to Robert Buchanan’s criticism, ‘The Stealthy School of Criticism’ (*Athenaeum* (16 October 1871), pp.792-4).

³⁴² Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p.265

³⁴³ *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, p.18. Helsinger is thinking here of Rossetti’s translations from Italian, but transposing visual data into verbal has a strong kinship with translations between languages, as reflected in the common critical metaphor of ekphrasis as a process of translation. Whether linguistic translations might be thought of more broadly under the umbrella of ‘recursion’ and ‘transposition’—and the corollary of whether languages might be considered media in their own right—is beyond the scope of my analysis here (but both questions might be answered interestingly in the affirmative).

paradigmatic) relations between [the art-object's] elements", which remain recognisable to the observer's analytic (and creatively imaginative) faculties after the transposition.³⁴⁴ We may align this fact with W.J.T. Mitchell's insight of art-objects as ekphrases' "resident alien[s]", which the poems "[tend] to alienate or displace", "to make ... disappear in favor of the textual image" "being produced by ekphrasis" in the observer's mind's eye as they continue to function as a *camera obscura*.³⁴⁵

There is an apparent tension here between, on the one hand, Rossetti discarding art-object's prior meanings in favour of "read[ing]" them for their contemporary meanings, or alienating art-objects in favour of visionary images; and on the other hand, Rossetti preserving an essence of the art-object as foreign to the poem (and the observer) at the moment of encounter. The observer effect reconciles that tension. As recursions, we know that ekphrastic texts have effects that are neither the "production of identity"—the total repetition of what has come before, of what is "foreign", temporally, medially, or otherwise—nor the annihilation of the 'original' in favour of the new. Rather, "predefined variation" is to be expected, not only for Rossetti's recursions, but also for those of the observer who follows him. In Rossetti's poetry, a new meaning will be envisioned, but is not yet, leaving further work to be done as the chain of recursions continues.

Each ekphrastic work invites the observer to enter into a visionary relationship with the art-object she encounters in order to produce a future meaning for it. As Lucien Agosta has suggested, "our role in [Rossetti's] act of creation is clear: it is [our] imagination" that, "working with the cues supplied in poem and painting, animates the forms and invests them with life in the aesthetic realm which they occupy".³⁴⁶ This is no mere accident of the ekphrastic genre. Rather as Carolyn Austin has suggested, Rossetti's poetry asserts a "subtle mastery" of the art-object by hinting at an "eventual triumph of the observer who can conceptualize the ineffable" qualities of those art-

³⁴⁴ Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p.265

³⁴⁵ *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.157, fn.9

³⁴⁶ 'Animate Images: The Later Poem-Paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 23.1 (1981), 78-101 (p.85)

objects.³⁴⁷ For Austin, the “observer” is the poet who produces a new work from their observer effect, but her line of argument can be extended to encompass the visionary observer of the art-object through Rossetti’s poetry, who Rossetti coaxes towards their own “eventual triumph”.

Pausing in ekphrastic “gaps”

I want to begin here with an exploration of one of Rossetti’s last-written ekphrastic poems, ‘For Spring’. Written in 1880, this poem recurs to Botticelli’s art, which had inspired several Rossetti paintings following his acquisition in 1867 of the *Portrait of Smerelda Bandinelli*.³⁴⁸ The sonnet recurs to *Primavera*, but also to other significant recursions of the nineteenth century, such as Algernon Charles Swinburne’s ‘A Vision of Spring in Winter’, entering into an ongoing conversation about the contemporary meaning of the painting.³⁴⁹ As Marion Thain argues, with the exception of John Ruskin, there was a general consensus amongst mid-to-late-nineteenth-century aesthetes that Botticelli’s art perfectly “combin[ed] the pagan and the Christian”, “a motif of their own obsession with beauty and ennui”.³⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Rossetti’s poem does not codify this consensus view, but makes heavy use of the apparently rhetorical question in order to provoke the observer into her own observer effect.

Such questions are a common feature in Rossetti’s poetry. As well as demanding that the observer do visionary work, they also structure reading, posing the poem as a set of interactions, a back-and-forth in which her inner voice is forced to participate. This is particularly true here, where three of the four question marks occur as caesuras at the mid-point of a pentameter line, reinforcing the expectation that such questions *will* be answered. As a consequence, when the observer reaches the poem’s concluding question

³⁴⁷ ‘Mastering the Ineffable: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “The Vase of Life” and the Kantian Sublime’, *Victorian Poetry*, 45.2 (2007) 159-173 (p.159)

³⁴⁸ Rossetti adds a footnote to ‘For Spring’ asserting that the same woman appears both in *Primavera* and *Smeralda Bandinelli*. The latter is now generally ascribed to the school of Botticelli, not the painter himself.

³⁴⁹ *Poems and Ballads: Second Series* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1878), pp.94-7

³⁵⁰ ‘Michael Field’: *Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.74

mark, she knows that she still has work to do, emphasised by the sonnet's return in the final couplet to its first rhyme.

As an ekphrasis, then, 'For Spring' is explicit in offering itself as an opportunity for the creation of new meanings through the cultural technique of encounter. The sonnet opens by focusing the observer's mind on visualising the painting's iconography and identifying or recollecting the facts of the represented scene: first, "what masque", what players, are represented; and second, at what event?³⁵¹ The interpretability of the image is at issue, and the poem asks the observer to interrogate the art-object ekphrastically in order first to determine its past meanings. The remainder of the octet assists us in explicates the first point, identifying the main figures within the painting's "masque" and positioning them in relation to each other in a manner similar to Michael Field's informative ekphrases. The sestet then attends to the second part of the question: the setting is described as "birth-bare, not death-bare", verifying the first line's assertion that the timing of the scene is at the start of some "old wind-withered New-Year", and suggesting that as the event for celebration.³⁵²

However, the poem's repetition of the art-object's visual data can only take us so far, and the "Honours" being done to "this Lady" in the image remain a "mystery" "of homage or of hope?".³⁵³ That is to say, is Venus being praised or begged? The poem questions what can be "read" passively from visual data, making the case for a dialogue between the art-object and the observer, if the technique for dialogue were available: "how command / Dead Springs to answer?" the poem asks, and "how question here / These mummers ...?".³⁵⁴ These three questions anchor the sonnet's sestet, giving the sonnet both an air of ambiguity and a heavy weight. The poem's need for answer grows as one's inner voice trips over the set of intertwining consonances and assonances that link the final three questions: the 'm's of "mystery", "homage", "command", "mummers"; the 'h's of "here" (twice), "homage", "hope", "how" (also twice); the

³⁵¹ l.1

³⁵² l.9, l.1

³⁵³ ll.11-12

³⁵⁴ ll.12-14

rapid 'w's "wind-withered", repeated from the first line, which slam our inner voice into the final "New-Year" with a questioning up-turn in tone.

It is perhaps because of the sestet's ambiguous weightiness, the way that it trips off our tongues but also demands we speak further to it after it has muted us, that Thain compares the sonnet unfavourably to Michael Field's later ekphrastic poems inspired by the same painting. She judges Rossetti's version to be a "still interlude" and Michael Field's a "drama" or "immediate temporal palimpsest" that "encodes a frozen moment, but also the story of the subsequent moment".³⁵⁵ However, I would argue that, as a recursion to *Primavera*, 'For Spring' does offer up to the mind's eye a subsequent moment as an integral part of the observer effect taking hold of us. It is simply that that moment is less strictly determined by the poet than in Michael Field's poem. Rather, the observer is invited to linger in the ekphrastic gaps of Rossetti's transposition so that she may follow Rossetti back in his recursion to the art-object and then return to a new present, her prospective future meanings in hand.³⁵⁶

Rossetti's work is often seen as reflecting a pause or suspension of action, and as Thain's analysis suggests, 'For Spring' is no exception. Approaching Rossetti's poetry through the lens of Pater's conceptualisation of a picture's 'still moment' as a musical interval, Hollander suggests that Rossetti "moves to the heart of the pictorial matter" by first "pointing to the momentary suspension" that an art-object generates through its synchronic representation of data, and then by identifying "that moment of pause" with "the relation between spots of time and the clear expanse of eternity".³⁵⁷ That is to say, Rossetti operationalises how an art-object can transmit data synchronically and

³⁵⁵ In concluding that Rossetti's is "the only poem to rival Michael Field's exploration of Botticelli", Thain sets to one side Swinburne's work, although it forms an important intertext for both later writers (*Michael Field*, p.83, 82).

³⁵⁶ As Barclay ('Consuming Artifacts') and Miller ('Mirror's Secret'), among others, have noted, there is a strong resemblance between a Rossettian moment and a Paterian one. In her exploration of "the moment" in Pater's work, Kate Hext remarks: "Pater uses time in order to open out the central tautology of 'art for art's sake': art, in other words, is not *for its own sake* exactly but for the sake of dignifying those ephemeral moments, which would otherwise be but flecks in deep time" (*Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p.146). A Rossettian divided moment that holds open the art-object, and the moment itself, for the observer thus has a great deal in common with Pater's aesthetic moment.

³⁵⁷ *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.84

strives to reflect this in some way through the inherently diachronic medium of poetry, relying on language's capacity to force us to pause in order to achieve this aim.

In 'For Spring', the octet renders the "masque" as a *tableau vivant*, with each character described in their place, drawing on the possible relation between pause and eternity. There is a notable absence of verbs in the first half of the octet, followed by the continuous present tense of the Graces "circling" and "hovering" before the present-tense "glide" that, both denotatively and connotatively, touches nothing.³⁵⁸ A pause and a permanence, this lack of action offers the observer a firm base from which to begin to create a future meaning for the scene. Thus, while Thain reads Rossetti's ekphrasis of *Primavera* as depicting "a far distant world" and "a closed secret",³⁵⁹ the secretive nature of the picture can be interrogated by the observer, who may produce her own answers. This runs counter to the *Stimmung* of fixity that pervades Michael Field's ekphrases.

Despite the poem's demand that the observer constructs her own answers, however, Rossetti does not treat the image as a cipher. His questions are not *quite* rhetorical; they seek to guide the observer. The poem's final questions implicitly modify Rossetti's answer to "what masque?" by asking how the observer might question the specific art-object, pointed to using the indexical language of "here", "these", and "that", in order to create an answer that pertains to "Dead Springs" in general.³⁶⁰ The play in Rossetti's final lines is between reading the art-object's visual data as either generic and mythographic, giving rise to answers predetermined by the poet, or specific and illustrative, wherein Rossetti leads the way so far—back to *Primavera*—but no further. The poem acknowledges the gaps between three moments in time: 'just-now', 'at-this-moment', and 'soon-to-be'. Rossetti's questions tell us that he can lead us from 'at-this-moment' on the backward leg of the observer-effect to 'just-now', but not on the forward journey to 'soon-to-be'.

³⁵⁸ l.5, l.7

³⁵⁹ p.84

³⁶⁰ ll.11-13. We might contrast this approach with Michael Field's similarly question-filled 'A *Faun's Punishment*, a Drawing by Correggio', which answers definitively its own opening questions (*Sight and Song*, pp.9-12).

Loss and “predefined variation”

This refusal to dictate the future meanings of the art-object is reflected in Rossetti’s poetry as a loss of interpretative certainty, and it is important to remind ourselves here that the purpose of recursions and the observer effect is not to achieve a deeper communion with an author or artist. In *Discourse Networks*, Kittler rejected the possibility of achieving a ‘meeting of minds’ with past authors on the grounds that changes to the material conditions of our reading prevent our fully understanding past readers or authors, and, as discussed in the Introduction, medial change and uncertainty about the interpretation of literature and art were significant features of discourse network 1890. Such alienation from the creators of art-objects and texts—and, in turn, their interpretative determinations—is an important, but often overlooked, component of Rossetti’s attitude towards loss, and an important factor in why he places so much weight on the observer effect.

It is a critical commonplace that Rossetti’s poetry centres on a feeling of loss,³⁶¹ usually interpreted as personal, with Rossetti interpreted as a *poète maudit* following the death of his wife and the end of his relationship with Jane Morris.³⁶² However, the loss of the Romantic ideal of communion between an observer and an author or artist through the latter’s work is also keenly expressed. In the context of art-objects, Barclay argues that Rossetti’s work bears an “elegiac sense of old meaning lost” and that, counter to the mid-to-late-nineteenth-century explosion in the number of gallery and museum exhibitions, Rossetti challenged the increasing accessibility of art-objects, demonstrating instead the “imaginative stretch necessary” to “establish a

³⁶¹ See, for example, Barclay, ‘Consuming Artifacts’; Andrea Henderson ‘The “Gold Bar of Heaven”: Framing Objectivity in D.G. Rossetti’s Poetry and Painting’, *ELH*, 76.4 (2009), 911-29; and Miller, ‘Mirror’s Secret’.

³⁶² Maxwell explores how critical analyses after Rossetti’s death have compared him against the model of the Artist in Isolation, borrowing a phrase from Frank Kermode, citing David Riede’s description of how Rossetti influenced the succeeding generation through his “exemplary, if painful, devotion to an ideal of beauty”, and his “role as a new type of artist” (*Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1992), p.7). Lionel Stevenson described Rossetti as the “first English poet” to “entirely fulfil the public image of the *poète maudit*” (*The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), p.77). Recent biographical work contests such readings, as in Jan Marsh’s *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999) and Roe’s *The Rossettis in Wonderland*.

Romantic intimacy” between artist and audience.³⁶³ While making such demands upon his audience, Rossetti had, according to Robert Buchanan, a “unique power of awakening artistic faith and literary fervour”, a “kind of artistic religion”.³⁶⁴ We can interpret this (belated) praise as referring to the power to inspire the observer effect in others. In doing so, Rossetti situates his own recursions and observer effects in a chain that can be continued to compensate (partially) for the loss of Romantic intimacy between observer and creator.

‘William Blake’ offers us an insight into this function of the observer effect.³⁶⁵ The poem emphasises how our medial circumstances prevent an observer from returning fully to an artist’s work by ekphrasising not Blake’s art, but a second-order art-object that encapsulates the *idea* of that work: a sketch of Blake’s home that Rossetti had for many years admired. The poem immediately draws attention to the physical space represented in the sketch: “This is the place”.³⁶⁶ As it proceeds, however, the poem highlights not only the physical but also the chronological gap between the encounter—through the sketch—with that place, and Blake’s occupation of it. The former is described in the present tense and with indexical language, “This is” and “Even here”; the latter, in the past tense of “wrought”, “partook”, and “passed”.³⁶⁷ This is an example of what Helsinger calls Rossetti’s “play” between an “inner standing point”, his “acts of imaginative projection into the space-time of paintings or imagined scenes”, and an “outer standing point”, a “more distanced, critical aesthetic perspective” rooted in his present moment.³⁶⁸ That is to say, Rossetti

³⁶³ ‘Consuming Artifacts’, p.19, p.3

³⁶⁴ ‘A Note on Dante Rossetti’, *A Look Round Literature* (London: Ward and Downey, 1887), pp.152-61 (p.153, p.152)

³⁶⁵ *Ballads* recombines poems into the ‘Five English Poets’ series that had previously been published in different combinations (‘Five English Poets’, *Rossetti Archive*, <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/24-1881.raw.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017]). The five poems were written in early 1880 as part of a reflection by Rossetti on English Romantic poetry. It comprises poems on Chatterton, Blake, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley. The poem on Blake was written in May. As reflected in the Rossetti Archive’s commentary on the series, the series was Rossetti’s own authorial response to two publications with which he had been involved: Alexander Gilchrist’s second edition of *The Life of William Blake* (London: Macmillan, 1880), and T.H. Ward’s *English Poets* (London: Macmillan, 1880). Although he had been heavily involved in the preparation of both editions of Gilchrist’s book, Rossetti refused to have this sonnet published in the revised edition. While happy to share his knowledge and his insight, Rossetti seems to have guarded his creative response to Blake more jealously.

³⁶⁶ l.1

³⁶⁷ ll.2-4

³⁶⁸ *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, p.xii

oscillates between writing from a position within the art-object, real or virtual, and writing from without it, as a way to combine the two phases of his observer effect.³⁶⁹

As we saw in *Sight and Song*, indexical language plays an important part in ekphrasis, as it can signal the presence of the art-object apart from its representation in language. Valentine Cunningham suggests that such language “slows or even stops” the “linear flow of narrative” in order “to encounter some spatial form”, asking us as readers to reflect on “*thereness*” because “writing is always tormented by the question of real presence”.³⁷⁰ The chronological gap that the poem highlights between “this” place and what took place “here” interrogates “*thereness*” by questioning whether a location may have the power to overwrite temporal distance. The interruption of narrative flow that Cunningham understands taking place owing to the referential function of indexical language also has an aural quality in Rossetti’s poetry, forcing our stops and starts. The poems first words form a choriamb, stressing “this” and “place” with the additional consonance of “is” carrying us through quickly to the caesura. We dwell on “place” a moment, before tripping along to the stress on “here”. Rossetti’s meter forces us into acknowledging the issue of “*thereness*” before we may learn a thing about the “place” itself.

The remainder of the octet provides us with Rossetti’s own recursion to the depicted scene, imagining the life of Blake when he, too, possessed a “*thereness*”. Owing to the poem’s focus on a second-order art-object that is an inevitable barrier between the observer and the drawing’s subject, however, the prospect of the art-object’s “real presence” becomes instead an absence that the poem must confront. An observer may imaginatively occupy Blake’s former home—the “here” where the “dauntless soul, / The unflinching hand” worked, the “very bed” on which he died, and the “work-window, whence his eyes would stare”—but there is no suggestion of encountering the spirit of Blake or the genius of his work there, either as a “real presence” or through a ‘meeting of minds’.³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ We may compare this with Michael Field’s liminal poems, in which the process of seeing the art-object from inside and outside is predominantly sequential, rather than combinatory.

³⁷⁰ ‘Why Ekphrasis?’, *Classical Philology*, 102.1 (2007), pp.57-71 (p.61, original emphasis)

³⁷¹ ll.1-6

Nevertheless, the sestet briefly hints to the observer how they *may* achieve indirect communion with the long-dead Blake, suggesting that the sanctifying touch of Blake's genius has been transmitted to the place itself. Blake's writings and art works—"the cloud / Of his soul writ and limned"—make "this cupboard" that contained them, conjured in the mind's eye and held in the present by Rossetti's indexical language, the "Holy of Holies".³⁷² The phrase refers to the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle containing the Ark of the Covenant, described in the Book of Exodus as holding the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, as well as Aaron's rod and manna, according to the Hebrew Bible. The poem thus associates Blake's works, "writ and limned", with the tablets bearing divine rules of conduct, but also intimates the metaphorical presence of manna through the immediate juxtaposition of that "Holy of Holies" with "this other [cupboard]", the pantry.³⁷³

The Romantic, quasi-religious intimacy that might involve a 'meeting of minds' with Blake, focused on his "soul" and the creative works that might provide us with creative guidance and sustenance, is discarded; the poem rather focuses on the physical elements of Blake's life in the depicted space, sleeping, looking, eating or going hungry. By drawing attention to the experience of Blake's once-living body "here", the poem also calls attention to the observer's body in the act of the cultural technique of encounter. We are resolutely there, and yet not-there; we are penetrated by the inner sights and sounds that represent the art-object, and yet detached from them. The observer's body is acted upon not by the view of the river, the comfort of the bed, or the sustenance of the pantry; it is acted upon solely by the sounds and connotations of the poem's language. While "this other [cupboard]" provided Blake and his wife "for daily bread the martyr's stone", this "other" representation of Blake's workspace, this poem, provides the merest scraps with which a creative observer effect might sustain itself.³⁷⁴

The loss of Romantic intimacy with the genius artist that 'William Blake' encodes through its multiple perspectives and focus on the quotidian details of the artist's life is an instance of what Miller has called Rossetti's "divided

³⁷² ll.9-10

³⁷³ l.10

³⁷⁴ l.12

moment”, wherein loss “has always already occurred or is about to occur or is occurring, in memory or in anticipation”. Miller argues that, in Rossetti’s work, “the feared future” that involves loss, through death or separation, “stand[s] for the already irrevocable past, and vice versa, in a constant far-fetching reversal of late and early”.³⁷⁵ Thus, the past tense of “partook / New birth, and passed”, which reflects on that immutable past loss of death, is conflated with the dissipation of the “cloud / Of his soul” that the observer might find when they follow Rossetti and project themselves imaginatively into that space.³⁷⁶ In a Rossettian divided moment, then, the past moment of Blake’s creativity, when the intangible “cloud” of genius enveloped the simple workroom, is irreparably lost to the present-day observer, both chronologically and medially.

Ironically, however, were the “cloud” of Blake’s genius to be dissipated wholly and completely, Blake’s workroom would be irrelevant and would not feature in Shields’ sketch, nor would Rossetti’s poem recur to that art-object. The sonnet’s existence undermines the sense of loss that it conveys and the supposed finality of the gap between Blake as a living artist in the past and the Blake-as-artist figure of the poem’s present, and art and poetry’s future. The poem’s *Stimmung* of loss, centred on the loss of Romantic intimacy, urges the observer to attempt an “imaginative stretch”, an observer effect, yet its acknowledgment of the recursive process as propelling creative variation cuts across that very same *Stimmung*.

Miller suggests that the prominence of loss in Rossetti’s work prevents “mirrored image[s]” from “tell[ing] the truth unequivocally”, where the “truth” is a fixed meaning, accessible via a form of standardised encounter.³⁷⁷ However, I argue that the cause and effect is the other way around. It is Rossetti’s awareness of the fact that “mirrored image[s]” must always be subject to the variation of recursion that leads to the repeated exploration of loss in his work, as well as to his “obsessive” method of production and “exhaustless” revision.³⁷⁸ Recognising this inversion of cause and effect may help us solve

³⁷⁵ ‘Mirror’s Secret’, p.337

³⁷⁶ ‘William Blake’, ll.3-4, ll.9-10

³⁷⁷ ‘Mirror’s Secret’, pp.333-4

³⁷⁸ McGann, *Game*, pp.96-7. Agosta reflects, in ‘Animate Images’, on Rossetti’s repeated artistic experiments. Cruise suggests that leaving a piece unfinished or a concept only partially refined was “an essential part of Rossetti’s way of formulating ideas and producing images”, to

the apparent paradox that Miller poses, having identified the many variations in Rossetti's work that derive from the irremediable past-ness of past meanings. He calls these variations a "counter-pattern", a pattern in name only because "each of its exemplars must be aberrant and none must be governed by an archetype", as a model that was exactly repeated "might turn loss into completion".³⁷⁹ Our Kittlerian approach allows us to acknowledge loss as the default position, however, and completion as impossible. From that vantage point, we can understand Miller's "counter-pattern" of loss instead as a recursive chain. The process by which apparent repetitions might preserve loss and swerve away from completion becomes clear; the same happens to the same, but with different results. An archetype would result in an "Output-is-Input-Mechanism", contrary to what we know is possible.³⁸⁰ No effort by Rossetti is actually necessary to ensure that each example is "aberrant"; aberrance, "predefined variation", is the only pattern there is.

Poetic "stunners": attention and absorption

Rossetti's reflections on loss, in particular the loss of Romantic intimacy with, or the control of, the author or artist, place a good deal of interpretative power on the observer's side. However, several critics have persuasively interpreted Rossetti's work as reflecting an authorial narcissism that dominates the observer. We must therefore reconcile Rossetti's demands that the observer works for her own observer effect with this supposed narcissism. Drawing again on Miller's analysis of the divided moment, I want to suggest that these two components of Rossetti's persona can be reconciled by understanding encounter and the observer effect as multi-stage events.

Maxwell identifies narcissism as a critical commonplace about Rossetti's personality that has often borne an "undercurrent of censure".³⁸¹ She seeks to rehabilitate Rossetti's narcissism as a component of the "peculiar appeal" that

which he would later return with renewed energy flowing from a fresh observer effect ('Revisiting Rossetti', p.5).

³⁷⁹ 'Mirror's Secret', p.340

³⁸⁰ "*Rekursivität liegt dann nicht nur in einem Output-wird-Input-Mechanismus*" (Niklas Luhmann, 'Antwort', in *Rekursionen*, ed. by Ana Ofak and Philipp von Hilgers (Fink: Berlin, 2009), pp.47-50 (p.49, my translation)).

³⁸¹ *Second Sight*, p.22

he shares with the oft-represented “narcissistic woman”: the “capacity to draw the rapt gaze of the reader or beholders”.³⁸² Tracing “narcissistic” back to the Greek root it appears to share with “narcotic”³⁸³—*narkē*, “numbness or stiffness”—Maxwell reflects on how both the observer and the artist or author can be “numbed, arrested, lulled into a stupor” by the “narcotic powers” of the image of the self, the “spectacle of narcissism”.³⁸⁴ Such efforts to “numb”, “arrest”, or “lull” the observer must, however, only be partially successful, or else no observer effect would be possible.

Although I am not persuaded by her strictly psychoanalytical reading of Rossetti’s work, Suzanne Waldman’s nuanced reading of Rossetti’s narcissism recognises this inherent failure of his efforts to stun and helps us to understand how it may contribute to Rossetti’s efforts to provoke an observer effect in those who follow his recursions. Waldman explores Rossetti’s ekphrastic poetry as engaging with his paintings in a relationship of secondary narcissism: in Lacanian terms, a relationship of “imaginary oscillation”, where the subject alternately “recognises his unity in an object” and “feels himself to be in disarray in relation to it”.³⁸⁵ This mirrors Miller’s analysis of Rossetti’s view of “life [a]s a crisis at every moment”, but while Miller notes that “what that ‘crisis’ is, cutting off before from after, and dividing the moment too within itself” “remains to be identified”, Waldman provides us with an answer.³⁸⁶ She interprets Rossetti’s narcissism as involving a cycle of inevitable change that “shatter[s]” the subject’s identity before “merging” it with the object as a means of protection.³⁸⁷ The crisis at every moment is that of the impending disintegration of the self and the impending absorption of the self by the object, the one after the other.

Leaving aside any psychoanalytical examinations of Rossetti himself, we may apply this same model to the observer. When she is stunned by Rossetti’s ekphrastic art, she experiences a momentary “shattering” of self that leaves her

³⁸² p.34

³⁸³ Whether the root is genuinely shared is difficult to identify. ‘Narcissism’ derives from the proper noun ‘Narkissos’, derived in turn from a pre-Greek word, according to R.S.P Beekes’ *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p.997. ‘Narcotic’ derives from *narkē*, and reaches English via medieval Latin. The connection may, therefore, be a false etymology, although it of course has a connotative resonance.

³⁸⁴ *Second Sight*, p.41

³⁸⁵ *The Demon and the Damozel*, p.72

³⁸⁶ ‘Mirror’s Secret’, p.335

³⁸⁷ *The Demon and the Damozel*, p.72

feeling in disarray in relation to the art-object, suddenly conscious of her lack of control over the art-object and the cultural technique of encounter. The observer effect offers a route to achieving something like “unity” with the art-object, bringing into being a set of future meanings (the ‘soon-to-be’) through the “interplay” of the shattered self and the art-object. The stunning mesmeric pull of narcissism in Rossetti’s work is thus the very feature that demands that the observer conduct her own work.

This effect of Rossetti’s poetry is in particular auditory.³⁸⁸ Steven Connor has written of how “sound is both process and object of pathos”, “produced by pathos—suffering, agitation—and reproduc[ing] it in others”. When that sound is internal, a phenomenon of silent reading, the “agitation” is a feedback loop: “agitation” that causes an inner voice to speak causes “agitation” as that inner voice is heard. Silent reading, then, may make the reader a *camera obscura*, but it is also a form of “touching [one]self”,³⁸⁹ “from the inside” as Gumbrecht has put it. In his reflection on poetry’s general capacity to bear *Stimmungen*, Gumbrecht notes that poems “with an especially high degree of semantic complexity or complicated wordplay”, like Rossetti’s, are poems “to whose contents we can do justice only when we refuse to let the rhythms they provide carry us along”.³⁹⁰ This potentially Lethean quality, like the self-soothing of a mumbled lullaby, parallels the stunning effects of Rossetti’s poems that we must resist.³⁹¹

³⁸⁸ Indeed, Meredith Martin has noted in her examination of decadent meter in the *fin de siècle*, that criticism of sensual poetry, such as Buchanan’s ‘The Fleshly School’, often “displays the fear of the purely sonic” alongside “the fear of bodily excess or excessive sexuality”, the capacity of sounds to act upon our bodies, and influence us in doing so, threatening our independence (‘Did a Decadent Metre Exist at the *Fin de Siècle*?’, in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Jason David Hall and Alex Murray (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp.46-64 (p.51)).

³⁸⁹ ‘Edison’s Teeth: Touching Hearing’, [StevenConnor.com](http://stevenconnor.com/edsteeth.html) <<http://stevenconnor.com/edsteeth.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017]. It is in this respect that poetry—and all literature—may be synaesthetic; reading the object before us with our eyes produces auditory sensation, and possibly also other somatic phenomena. Investigations of these somatic phenomena, in particular through the study of affect in recent years, are beyond the scope of this chapter.

³⁹⁰ *Stimmung*, p.48

³⁹¹ Work on the recorded sound of these texts may further illuminate their auditory effects, although here I focus on silent reading. See Jason Camlot’s ‘Historicist Audio Forensics: The Archive of Voices as Repository of Material and Conceptual Artefacts’, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 21 (2015), no pagination <<http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.744>> [accessed 17 March 2017].

In close reading 'A Sea-Spell' and 'Fiammetta', I examine in greater detail how Rossetti effects this multi-sensory stunning in order to provoke an observer effect, and how his techniques for doing so contribute to his poems' *Stimmung* of loss. I suggest that Rossetti's effects of stunning are correlated with what Helsinger identifies as the first of three strategies that Rossetti used to renew poetry: attention. The observer effect is initiated by attention, then, in response to Rossetti's efforts to stun. The momentary shattering of one's sense of self opens up the possibility for recognising one's unity with the art-object by (re)constructing a personal future meaning for it. The other two strategies that she has identified—repetition and translation across languages, culture, and media—are part and parcel of recursion's chronological short-circuits, which follow the observer's paying attention.³⁹²

'A Sea-Spell' demonstrates how stunning functions as an act of capturing the observer's attention and inviting her observer effect, but it also demonstrates formally and thematically the role of audition in that observer effect. One of several Rossettian works figuring sirens, Bullen argues that 'A Sea-Spell' reduces the "castrating harpy" of *Ligeia Sirena* to a "meditative gentleness as she listens peacefully" to her music, which is later reflected in the painting of the same name.³⁹³ However, I would argue that 'A Sea-Spell' offers a version of the siren in keeping with the aggressive *Ligeia*; her listening is neither "meditative" nor "peaceful", but eager for the consequences of her deadly song.

The title of the poem primes us to expect to meet the figure of the siren, the archetypal caster of sea-spells, and thus to be enchanted or stunned by sounds "more powerful than anything natural".³⁹⁴ The poem thus warns us of the impossibility of refusing our attention while also evoking the figure of Odysseus and his success in resisting that spell. Thus, we approach the poem's first line with ears pricked, but cautiously. Our expectations of meeting a siren are quickly met: the musical nature of her spell is invoked by the mention of "her

³⁹² Helsinger argues in particular that recursion "generates formal experimentation and resistant play with the inevitable progressions of both historical and personal time" (*Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, p.2). Recursion and transposition provide a mechanism for "resist[ing]" such "inevitable progressions" of chronology by drawing immediate connections between the current work's symbols, imagery or themes, and those of a meaningful historical or personal moment.

³⁹³ *Rossetti*, pp.239-41

³⁹⁴ Agosta, 'Animate Images', p.82

lute”,³⁹⁵ and we learn that she is on land, even though the spell we are anticipating belongs to the sea. Moreover, the poem warns us that her spell is dangerous. Although the music is “sweet”, it comprises “wild notes” that “swell”, produced by “flashing fingers” that imply a bewildering soundscape.³⁹⁶ The consonance of “flashing fingers” evokes the tangled, impossible-to-follow nature of the song through the alternating ‘f’ and ‘ing’ sounds, while the three stressed, sibilant syllables of “sweet-strung spell” emphasise the song’s enchanting nature.³⁹⁷ That the “spell” arises not from the lute’s strings but the “weav[ing]” of the siren’s fingers “*between* its chords” highlights that the music is supernatural, while the word “weave” draws on the trope of Penelope to imply the tactical element of the siren’s spell.³⁹⁸ The lute responds magically to the siren’s touch, and she plays with a stratagem in mind.

These resonances, condensed into the first three lines of the poem, are clear only if we are able to restrain ourselves as Gumbrecht recommends, as we might be easily swept away: the second line’s alliterations speed away from the first line’s apparently innocuous scene under the “apple-tree”, and its enjambment emphasises “between” and its elongating repetition of the “e” that follows us from “tree” to “weave” to “sweet”. “Its chords” comes quickly, at the end of a breath, before the semi-colon gives us a moment’s pause and new impetus, carrying the line to that other long “e” in “swell”. It would be easy to rush through these lines, swayed, lulled, and dragged by its sounds and rhythm, like the “sea-bird” that leaves its natural home, “the sea”, “for those branches”.³⁹⁹

It is worth noting, while we are pausing with the poem’s first lines and resisting their rhythms so as to apply our analytical tools to them, that although ‘A Sea-Spell’ and Rossetti’s siren paintings recur to the trope of the sirens left to Western art by Homer’s *Odyssey*, they feature only a single isolated woman,

³⁹⁵ Johnson, in ‘Musical Instrument’, notes that the instrument represented in *A Sea-Spell* is a *koto*, or Japanese zither, which features also in *The Blue Bower*. I follow Rossetti in naming the instrument as a lute, a generic term symbolically associated with Apollo.

³⁹⁶ ‘A Sea-Spell’, ll. 1-3

³⁹⁷ l. 2

³⁹⁸ ll. 2-3, emphasis mine

³⁹⁹ l. 4

contrary to the Homeric pair.⁴⁰⁰ Instead of singing with her sister, a lute accompanies Rossetti's siren. This isolation is not a precondition of a Rossettian stunner—*Astarte Syriaca* shows as much—but hints that the first victim of her spell may have been her fellow siren, whom she has reduced to lute strings that sing supernaturally in place of vocal cords. If we think again of Connor's idea of sound as "produced by pathos—suffering, agitation—and reproduc[ing] it in others", then there is something deeply sinister about this replacement of a sister's autonomous vocal cords with the lute strings that would fall silent except for the siren's "flashing fingers". The isolation of the siren with her lute is thus a stark warning to the reader about the consequences of becoming too absorbed by her spell, of paying attention.

That warning is played out dramatically at the end of the poem. Both 'A Sea-Spell' and its art-object counterpart focus on the moment prior to the siren being joined by the stunned and entrapped mariner and its implicit corollary: his death. Although in the present tense, the poem depends on our recursive ability to identify the siren figure and her past meanings—beautiful, dreadful, lethal—before inviting us to imagine the soon-to-be outcome of her song. The death of the mariner is "fated", but the poem leaves open not only the experience of that moment, but also the many ancillary outcomes, the "throng" of "creatures of the midmost main" who will also be drawn to the siren.⁴⁰¹

Like the observer, the siren longs for, and must produce, the soon-to-be. The poem creates an unlikely parallel between our encounter with the art-object through the poem and the siren's encounter with her own music. Like us, the first step that the siren must take is paying attention: "stoop[ing]" "her listening ear". That the siren has stunned herself is made explicit in the sestet, wherein "she sinks into her spell" and accordingly "she soars into her song".⁴⁰² These parallel constructions of three iambs, smoothly mobile with sibilants, emphasise

⁴⁰⁰ Kittler discusses the sirens as a duo in 'The Alphabet of the Greeks: On the Archaeology of Writing'. The number of sirens varies in the accounts that follow Homer, from two to five, and their names also differ. However, Kittler insists on the Homeric account of there being only two, and concludes that "the relationship [between them] is harmony, as the[y] sing it, and the harmony that sounds is the Oracle of Delphi—a double explanation" of both literal and interpreted meaning. (*The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp.267-74 (p.272))

⁴⁰¹ l.11

⁴⁰² ll.9-10

how stunning and creative work operate alongside one another. The siren offers us a model for how, being stunned, we may yet remain attentive and complete the observer effect, creating future meanings.

The siren's music becomes increasingly compelling, its pull increasing with repetition. At first, it simply draws the "sea-bird", which leaves its natural habitat for her bower; it promises then to draw a "throng" of other creatures from the sea's "furrowed surf-clouds" to her, "the summoning rune"; finally, it attracts "the fated mariner".⁴⁰³ In our stunned state, we may be anticipating the terrible death of the mariner; after all, that is a defining characteristic of the sirens, according to the past meanings of that trope. However, the poem suggests an alternative future meaning, arising from Rossetti's observer effect. The siren does not await the (inevitable) arrival and death of the mariner but waits to hear music in answer to her own: "netherworld gulf-whispers" and "echoes from [a] planisphere".⁴⁰⁴ Yet, these two must be linked; the mariner is the only drawn creature known to die, to enter the netherworld. The echoes of her song that come from the afterlife can thus be interpreted as the whispers of the mariner across the gulf after his death, a speaking back in the sort of circuit of pathos that Connor describes. The siren is oblivious to the external world around her because she awaits these "whispers", a new meaning arisen out of the same, out of the old, well-worn trope of the mariner come to die at the siren's feet, an "echo" that is not a repetition but a predefined variation.

As observers, we thus have to contend with two apparent recursions in 'A Sea-Spell': Rossetti's (ekphrastically) poetic recursion to the trope of the sirens, and the siren's own recursive music. Having been swept along by the music that the poem and the siren seem to share, we are left "stoop[ing]" our own inner ear to the vibrations that that music produces within us. We are part of the "throng" of "creatures" that responds to the siren's song, which demands our attention; we bear witness to the siren's song and the mariner's approach and death, as we can control neither. Our own observer effect allows us to answer the poem's final question—"what creatures of the midmost main shall throng" to the siren before the mariner?—with the answer: we shall. We are,

⁴⁰³ l.4, ll.11-13

⁴⁰⁴ ll.6-7, l.13

through the poem, already there, anticipating the final outcome that is, nevertheless, only a product of our own observer effect.

Like 'A Sea-Spell', 'Fiammetta' recurs to a common figure in Rossetti's work. Written in 1878 while Rossetti was completing the corresponding painting, *A Vision of Fiammetta*, the poem provides close commentary on the art-object. *Vision* is itself a return to the theme of Fiammetta following his 1866 painting and his much earlier translation of Boccaccio's sonnet,⁴⁰⁵ first published in *The Early Italian Poets* in 1861, but probably written much earlier. The Rossetti Archive suggests that his interest in the myth of Fiammetta as Boccaccio's beloved, "in certain respects stands in a closer relation to his work than does the myth of Beatrice" because Fiammetta is a recursion, "a second-order poetical construction, an imaginative response to and reprise on the Beatricean vision explicated in Dante's work".⁴⁰⁶ Thus, as in 'William Blake', Rossetti uses a second-order art-object to remind the observer from the outset of the recursions embedded in this, and each, instance of encounter.

It is in such instances of multiple recursions to the same image or theme that Maxwell sees an unveiling of meaning that Rossetti had submerged in previous iterations. However, 'Fiammetta' stands not as a corrective, but distinctly as a variation on the theme. Rossetti does not overwrite his previous painting of Fiammetta, but acknowledges its existence gently in the first line, directing the observer's attention to the fact that the Fiammetta they are to "behold" is that "shown in Vision here".⁴⁰⁷ This instruction, like that of an art authority guiding a gallery tour, assumes that the observer both appreciates Fiammetta as an archetype of the beloved, and understands how such archetypes are usually treated in art: multiply, either by various artists or in various pieces by a single artist.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ The sonnet's authorship is now disputed, but Rossetti's source material, *Raccolta di Rime Antiche Toscane*, attributed it to Boccaccio ('Sovra li fior vermigli, e' capei d'oro', *Rossetti Archive*, <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/95d-1861orig.raw.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017]).

⁴⁰⁶ 'Giovanni Boccaccio. "Sonnet. Of his last sight of Fiammetta.", <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/95d-1861.raw.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017] (para. 2 of 6)

⁴⁰⁷ l.1

⁴⁰⁸ We may contrast this with Michael Field's 'Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*', which highlighted Venus' representations in multiple art-objects but suggested a linearity rather than a plurality. Venus has "left her archèd shell"; there is but one of her, moving from one art-object to another (*Sight and Song*, pp.98-105 (l.4)).

An observer encountering *Vision* would find themselves with significant support in tracing Fiammetta's associations, as the frame bears the original Italian sonnet,⁴⁰⁹ Rossetti's English translation, and 'Fiammetta'.⁴¹⁰ However, an observer encountering the art-object ekphrastically, with only *Ballads* before her, must work harder in order to make such connections themselves. This latter experience was by far the more common for Rossetti's contemporaries, as Rossetti frequently withheld his paintings from the viewing public during his lifetime. Thus, while 'Fiammetta' was first published in the *Athenaeum* on 5 October 1878 with a corresponding prose ekphrasis,⁴¹¹ perhaps in partial acknowledgment of the challenge that the poem alone poses for an observer, *Vision* was not exhibited until after Rossetti's death in 1882.⁴¹²

Rossetti's reticence to exhibit has been variously interpreted as capitalist—"an astute kind of career management"⁴¹³—and cowardly—J.B. Bullen suggests that Rossetti's became reticent to exhibit out of a fear of misinterpretation after Robert Buchanan's 'Fleshly School of Poetry' attack⁴¹⁴—

⁴⁰⁹ 'Vision' refers to Boccaccio's final vision of Fiammetta after her death, translated by Rossetti as 'Of his last sight of Fiammetta' and published in *Dante and His Circle: With the Italian Poets Preceding Him* (London: Ellis and White, 1874), pp.252-3.

⁴¹⁰ Henderson provides a detailed discussion of Rossetti's work with picture frames, including his increasing use of poetry on his canvases in response to the frequent reframing of his work ('Framing Objectivity').

⁴¹¹ 'Mr Rossetti's New Picture, "A Vision of Fiammetta"', *Athenaeum* (5 October 1878), pp.439-40. This publication was preceded by a mention of the picture in 'Fine-Art Gossip', which rendered its own prose ekphrasis that offers a slightly different interpretation again: "Mr Rossetti has lately completed a new and important picture, rendering his reading of a sonnet of Boccaccio's, and describing Fiammetta, a lady in a red or flame-coloured dress, standing before us, holding a scarlet bird on her finger above her head; the face is a masterpiece of inspiration in regard to its expression and super-sensuous beauty. We hope shortly to be able to describe this picture at length" (*Athenaeum* (7 September 1878), p.314). It is fair to say, then, that Rossetti's paintings were much watched-for, and that the public were used to hearing about them through partial ekphrases, from the painter or others.

⁴¹² The review of the exhibit in the *Manchester Guardian* admired the "strange poetry of the thought that animates it" but bemoaned Rossetti's great attention to mythological themes at the expense of work "touching modern life and modern faces". It also noted that his paintings in that exhibition were likely to be "the point ... to which the lover of art will continually recur with the freshest interest and the most unsatisfied curiosity". The use of the verb "recur" is fascinating here, suggesting precisely how Rossetti's work demanded creative engagement from observers, rather than satisfying their curiosity with apparently definitive interpretations. ('Exhibition at the Royal Institution', *Manchester Guardian*, 19 May 1882 <<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2010/jun/02/archive-exhibition-at-the-royal-institution-1882>> [accessed 17 March 2017] (para. 4 of 5))

⁴¹³ Cruise, 'Revisiting Rossetti', p.5

⁴¹⁴ He suggests that Rossetti "rejected repeated invitations to exhibit at what would have been for him the perfect public space: the Grosvenor Gallery" (*Rossetti*, p.246) in the light of Buchanan's review (published under the pseudonym Thomas Maitland: 'The Fleshly School of Poetry', *Contemporary Review*, 18 (October 1871), 334-50).

but Rossetti himself variously gave professional dissatisfaction with his work and the excess of opportunities for Academicians as reasons for declining to exhibit.⁴¹⁵ Both reasons align with the turn by Rossetti to “pictures that could not be ‘seen’ by contemporaries without effort and attention”.⁴¹⁶ While suggesting a certain aesthetic elitism, this also highlights the importance of the observer’s work in encountering art-objects; art-objects should challenge the observer, and her encounter of them should not be too easy. Rossetti’s use of aural effects to convey meaning to us almost subconsciously, through “touch[es] from the inside” is particularly in evidence in ‘Fiammetta’, as are his efforts to “stun” us.

The imperative “behold” and past participle “shown” call attention to the painter and his predetermination of how the art-object’s subject is presented, to be ‘held fast’ by the observer. Yet the ekphrastic description of *Vision* lacks the stage directions that we might associate with such a directive poem. There is no ‘left’ or ‘right’ in the way that the poem draws attention to both of Fiammetta’s hands, for example, one of which might be easily missed in looking at *Vision* itself. Rather, Fiammetta simply “sways the branches with her hands”, the line’s plurals drawing equal attention to both.⁴¹⁷ We may note how the prose ekphrasis published alongside the sonnet in 1878 provides yet another interpretation: Fiammetta “stands as if parting the apple-boughs”.⁴¹⁸ The multiple interpretations that an observer of *Vision* might have of the juxtaposition of hand and branch are played out in Rossetti’s ekphrastic variations.

Moreover, ‘Fiammetta’ makes no mention of her reaching above her with one hand, leaving the observer to intuit the particular positioning of branch and (an) arm from the subsequent line: “Along her arm the Sundered bloom falls sheer”.⁴¹⁹ When the poem wishes to describe that “bloom”, it does so not precisely, but fancifully: the petals are “shed, each like a tear”, not merely “tear-shaped”.⁴²⁰ The poem plays with the habits of speech that might lead us to

⁴¹⁵ *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Collected Writings*, ed. by Jan Marsh (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999), p.501

⁴¹⁶ Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, p.27

⁴¹⁷ ‘Fiammetta’, l.3

⁴¹⁸ ‘Mr Rossetti’s New Picture’, p.440

⁴¹⁹ ‘Fiammetta’, l.4

⁴²⁰ l.5

associate “shed” with “tear[s]”, in particular when we anticipate a rhyme for “sheer”.⁴²¹ Moreover, it provides multiple metaphors with which to associate the two words: the petals drop singularly, as tears do from eyes; they drop in a particular pattern that resembles the movement of tears along a cheek (borne out by *Vision*, if we refer to it); the petals are each individually tear-shaped. We may hear and see any one of these, or any combination thereof, as we read Rossetti’s poem.

Two lines later, we receive affirmation for whatsoever interpretation we have developed of Rossetti’s imagery by relying on his stunning words and evocative rhymes. “Lo!”, the poem informs us, “thy spirit understands”.⁴²² What, we ask upon meeting with the line’s enjambment, do we understand? What observer effect might the poem validate? The answer given: “Life shaken and shower’d and flown, and Death drawn near”.⁴²³ The use of the verb “shower’d”, unusual and unexpected here, summarises the truth of the tree’s petals, making the simile of their likeness to tears into a full-blown metaphor; they are drops of water that “shower” Fiammetta, and so the tree (“shaken”), she, and the “bird [that] expands / His wings” together comprise “Life”.⁴²⁴

The passive nature of “shower’d” identifies Fiammetta with the observer, who is the witness but not the master of what she encounters. While “all stirs with change”, Fiammetta herself is positioned against the motion that she has apparently instigated.⁴²⁵ Twice, the poem emphasises her static position: she “stands”.⁴²⁶ Stationary, she also ‘stands in’ for both a “presage” and “promise”; as well as standing in for the observer, she warns of “Death’s dark storm”, in that she is surrounded by “gloom”, but also assures the beauty of “the rainbow of the Soul”, surrounded as she is also by “Spring-flushed apple-growth”.⁴²⁷ Fiammetta has knowledge of some future meaning that she both presages and promises, as though in emerging visually from the foliage she emerges metaphorically from a completed observer effect, returning to her present with

⁴²¹ Indeed, if not for the rhyme, we might even interpret “tear” as a synonym of “rip”, and the line might take on a resonance more violent than sad.

⁴²² l.7

⁴²³ l.8

⁴²⁴ ll.6-7

⁴²⁵ l.9

⁴²⁶ l.2, l.13

⁴²⁷ ll.13-14, l.2

future meanings in hand. Rossetti thus loses all control over the interpretation of the art-object, whose central figure seems to be acting on her own accord, his opening “behold” only opening the door for the observer’s own encounter with the art-object.

Reverie and paralysis: the dangers of pausing too long

So far, then, we have understood Rossetti’s poems as employing still, “divided” moments as a means for holding a space open for the observer effect, once the observer has been stunned into paying attention to Rossetti’s own recursions. These observer effects flow from his poems’ *Stimmung* of loss, as the only form of (partial) compensation for the loss both of Romantic intimacy with, and the interpretative control of, the artist-author. There is, however, a risk of these still moments—the pull of Rossetti’s narcissism, the paying of attention by the observer—proving too strong, and the observer effect proving impossible. The poem that follows ‘Fiammetta’, ‘The Day-Dream’, illustrates the risk posed by recursions that remain too closely tied to past meanings: they may lose their effect and prove less satisfying than previous iterations, a risk that, as we saw, impacted the reception of Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*.

Drawing again on Swinburne’s ‘A Vision of Spring in Winter’ and Botticelli’s *Primavera*, ‘The Day-Dream’ reflects on the fleeting nature of beauty by depicting a suspended moment before its decay, which is tied to the theme of reverie. Loss, that key component of Rossetti’s work, is deferred almost too completely. The poem suggests that without loss, and in particular without the loss of some data in the process of transposition, there is no space within which a creative function can occur.

Like ‘Fiammetta’, ‘The Day-Dream’ was written as Rossetti completed a new art-object: a painting of Jane Morris, which he had heavily reworked.⁴²⁸ In a letter to Jane, he noted that “since I painted the spring leaves, the picture has undergone much remodelling”, with the result that the tree “looks very full in leaf

⁴²⁸ The painting followed a sketch from 1878, which was a reworking of a drawing from 1872, Rossetti’s recursive chains being always long and self-referential (‘The Day-Dream (for a Picture)’, *Rossetti Archive* <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/7-1880.s259.raw.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017]).

for a spring-tree".⁴²⁹ Rossetti's dissatisfaction with that element of the painting is reflected in the poem. Spring remains in full force in the poem's descriptions of the "thronged boughs of the shadowy sycamore", while "young leaflets" linger on "half the summer through", and "still the leaves come new".⁴³⁰ This "still" towards the end of the octet emphasises the apparent chronological pause, echoing the "still" of the second line (the boughs "still bear young leaflets"). In an earlier draft, sent to Morris in September 1880, the second line read "still fledge young leaflets", a phrasing that strengthens the echo between lines two and six, emphasising the ongoing production of leaves, a fecundity that seems excessive outside of the chronological spring.⁴³¹ However, the word "bear" instead emphasises pause or delay, suggesting that the spring leaves are overstaying on the boughs out of some perverse suspension, a refusal to develop, not simply a failure to do so.

While Rossetti was dissatisfied with the verisimilitude of his intended spring foliage,⁴³² his change to the octet suggests a shift from disappointment or frustration at the failure to depict the intended scene to an interpretative mode of thought, responding to the art-object recursively in order to construct a future meaning for the painting that goes beyond recovering its past meaning, that is to say, his original intention. While the art-object itself might remain perfectly beautiful in its implausible fecundity, the poem dwells on the recursive creative process and the aesthetic dangers of cleaving too closely to the past meanings that recursion recovers. Although the leaves are "still" borne by the same "boughs", none are ever as "rosy-sheathed" as those which emerged "heretofore", during spring proper.⁴³³ Not only do the spring leaves of the poem's present moment represent a refusal to develop, but they also represent a failure of a repetition to be as beautiful as what preceded it because it insists on being an exact repetition, resisting variation.

⁴²⁹ *Correspondence*, 80.237

⁴³⁰ ll.1-2, 6

⁴³¹ 'Letter to Jane Morris, 3 September 1880'

<<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/dgr.ltr.0546.rad.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017]

⁴³² He nevertheless clung to the notion of the tree as a spring one in his prose ekphrasis, describing the painting as of a sycamore bower in "about April" ("The Day-Dream", Lasner Manuscript', *Rossetti Archive*, <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/7-1880.lasnerms.rad.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017]).

⁴³³ 'The Day-Dream', ll.7-8

The poem then applies this phenomenon of representation to the imagination: “Reverie”, which like the bower offers “branching shade” apparently outside of either personal or historical time.⁴³⁴ Like the “young leaflets”, “dreams even may spring till autumn”, almost until the moment when the robin takes possession of the scene again.⁴³⁵ The sestet includes the active verb of production that Rossetti removed from the previous draft of the octet. “Spring”, as well as a playing on the temporal pause of that season “the summer through”, highlights the production of “dreams”, which might be thought of as images in the mind’s eye. By analogy with the leaves of the octet, which linger and repeat, “still ... com[ing] new”, we can understand the “dreams” under the “branching shade of Reverie” to be repetitions that “may spring till autumn”, and they, too, are inferior. The best of day-dreams is “woman’s budding day-dream spirit-fanned”.⁴³⁶ The day-dream of the woman is, implicitly, the analogue of the superior leaves “which drew / Their spiral tongues from spring-buds heretofore”, a superiority that is reinforced by the fact that the “deep skies” that she unseeingly watches are “not deeper than her look”.⁴³⁷ The poem suggests, then, an imaginative vision that is impossible to re-create in art, and the dangers of art cleaving too closely to efforts to repeat or recreate beautiful things. Warning against the expectation that a recursion, the same happening to the same, might produce an identical effect, the poem instead points towards the “deep” look of the dreamer that suggests individual creative thought, as in the observer effect.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to derive the operational script of encounter that Rossetti’s ekphrastic poetry might encapsulate. Rossetti’s creative work generally, and his poetry in particular, was praised by his contemporaries as recursive, and has given rise to a number of studies into his “obsessive” and repetitive aesthetic productions. As Helsinger has suggested, Rossetti

⁴³⁴ l.9

⁴³⁵ l.10, l.3

⁴³⁶ ll.11

⁴³⁷ ll.7-8, l.12

employed “lyric patterning, intensity shaped and augmented in repetition” “in the Face of an undifferentiated (and empty) horizon, a vast extension of time without internal progression and a distant goal, a future without either the religious hope of final revelation or the modern secular hope in progress and worldly achievement”.⁴³⁸ In this respect, then, Rossetti is Kittlerian: recursion is the only mechanism available to him as a human subject adrift amid media. Yet, in line with the common view of Rossetti as an aesthetic “prophet” or narcissistic artist, these studies of Rossetti’s recursions have not been able to elucidate the consequences of this fact, or what Rossetti asks of the observer who shares his position. Indeed, Thain has suggested that reading Rossetti’s poetry as “a retreat to a domain of formal order in a chaotic world” is “to underestimate” Rossetti’s innovative “thinking about the role of poetry”.⁴³⁹

Far from positioning Rossetti’s ekphrastic poetry as prophetic, then, as interpreting art-objects definitively, or imbuing his ekphrases with a *Stimmung* of fixity, I have demonstrated how his work and its *Stimmung* of loss demand visionary work by the observer. What Barclay has called Rossetti’s “new emphasis” on the “process of transmission and consumption”, I call his emphasis on the observer effect, demanding the labour of the observer in comprehending the ‘just-now’ and ‘at-this-moment’ and producing the ‘soon-to-be’.⁴⁴⁰ Drawing on the work of Helsinger, Rudy and others in understanding how Rossetti’s technical *a priori*, here, I deploy the term ‘visionary’ as not exclusively relating to vision, but as indicating someone who has original ideas about the future. Thus, Rossetti’s visionary cultural technique of encounter involves both inner vision and inner audition on the part of the observer. It is in particular through sound’s “touch[es] from the inside” that the observer’s body is brought into “interplay” with both the art-object and Rossetti’s poems as constructed textual “objects” that do not merely reproduce a moment, but craft one.

Rossetti’s poetry employs “divided moment[s]” in order to invite the observer to pause within the ekphrastic “gaps” of his poems, where the loss of

⁴³⁸ *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, p.256

⁴³⁹ ‘Decadent Forms: Parnassus in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Decadent Forms*, ed. by Hall and Murray, pp.65-82 (p.67)

⁴⁴⁰ ‘Consuming Artifacts’, p.17

visual data offers opportunities for future meanings to be constructed. In particular, Rossetti uses imagery and sound to stun his readers, to demand their active attention and engagement. Several of his ekphrastic poems also then reflect Rossetti's expectations that the observer will produce an observer effect, with the siren of 'A Sea-Spell' and Fiammetta demonstrating how future meanings might be recovered. For Michael Field, ekphrasis was a tool for demonstrating their aesthetic powers, and so advocating for their individual cultural technique of encounter. For Rossetti, ekphrastic poetry offers a cultural technique of encounter predicated upon the aural interactions of the observer with the poem, and her internal visionary work. Some of Rossetti's most common themes, including loss, reverie, and the "stunner", work to enhance our understanding of his ekphrastic poetry—and, it might be argued, all his poetry—as setting out a supporting framework for the observer effect and an invitation to make use of it. Rossetti's visionary encounter acts as a mode of resisting the separation of traditional art and literature, or the supplanting of both by new media, by seeking to make them allies in the project of renewing poetry.

Chapter 3

The haunted (encounter with the) art-object:

Vernon Lee's dangerous past

*The incident of Faustus and Helena ... haunts like some vague strain of music, drowsily heard in half-sleep. It fills the fancy, it oscillates and transforms itself; the artist may see it, attempt to seize and embody it for evermore in a definite and enduring shape, but it vanishes out of his grasp, and the forms which should have inclosed it are merely empty sepulchres, haunted and charmed merely by the evoking power of our own imagination.*⁴⁴¹

Current critical approaches to Vernon Lee strongly resemble those towards Michael Field. Her work is often addressed either to demonstrate her affinity with a 'traditional' Aesthetic and Decadent circle circumscribed by Walter Pater,⁴⁴² Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Charles Baudelaire, and Algernon Charles Swinburne, or to recuperate her as a female or lesbian author distinct from them. Despite living for most of her life in Italy, and despite personal fallings out with some of her fellow writers based in Britain, Lee shared many of the same reading materials and cultural experiences that allow us to understand her work as a response to the pressures and anxieties of discourse network 1890 that were also informing Michael Field, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Wilde.⁴⁴³ She was, then, a participant in the same broad discourse network 1890 as these other three authors.

⁴⁴¹ Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), 'Faustus and Helena', in *Belcaro, being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: W. Satchell, 1881), pp.70-105 (p.71)

⁴⁴² As with Michael Field, much criticism seeks to triangulate Lee between Pater and John Ruskin, often despite claims for Lee's particularity on account of her gender. Thus, Mary Patricia Kane, Patricia Pulham, Renate Brosch and Kristin Mahoney have all sought to distinguish the portraits in *Hauntings* from Pater's 'La Gioconda', with Mahoney placing Lee "firmly within a Ruskinian framework" ('Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption', *Criticism*, 48.1 (2006), 39-67 (p.48)). On the other hand, Sarah Townley urges further attention to "strands of Lee's writings" that reflect "aestheticism's traditional emphasis", arguing that Lee's "authorial strategies ... prioritise the artistic principles of Paterian aestheticism" ('Vernon Lee and Elitism: Redefining British Aestheticism', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 54.4 (2011), 523-38 (p.525)).

⁴⁴³ Although it proves something of a non-issue here, the different medial situations in European countries during the nineteenth century mean that we must tread carefully when comparing across discourse networks. While recursion, the observer effect and cultural techniques are tools that can be applied across discourse networks and national boundaries, we must still historicise them, which includes an awareness of geographical distinctions.

Angela Leighton notes that Lee, in *Belcaro*, interpreted discourse network 1890 as including a “craving” for “spectres”,⁴⁴⁴ and Lee’s *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890) goes some way to answering that desire while also illustrating her belief, set out at the beginning of this chapter, that efforts to communicate ghostly “fanc[ies]” result in “merely empty sepulchres”.⁴⁴⁵ Andrew Eastham suggests that Lee here makes “the primary intellectual statement” about “spectrality”, which “had become one of the defining desires” of aesthetes and decadents in discourse network 1890.⁴⁴⁶ However, as Leighton notes, Lee approaches the question in a non-traditional way, “dispensing with the conventions of fear”.⁴⁴⁷ In contrast to other supernatural stories of the period, Lee’s feature “the ghosts of a historicism largely untroubled by supernatural design”, their horror underpinned not by “the terror of the unknown”, but by “the seductive, fascinating difference of the past”.⁴⁴⁸ *Hauntings* is thus primarily concerned with the emergence of figures, tropes, and ideas of the past.

Patricia Pulham describes Lee herself as being “haunted by art”, and art-objects play an important role in her fiction as material traces of the past that initiate characters’ haunted encounters with them.⁴⁴⁹ When read alongside Lee’s non-fiction writings on aesthetics from the late-nineteenth century,⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁴ ‘Seeing Nothing: Vernon Lee’s Ghostly Aesthetics’, in *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.99-124 (p.110)

⁴⁴⁵ *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, 2nd edition (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1906). First editions are rare. In a letter to her mother on 9 October 1891, Lee records that “half the [first] edition of ‘Hauntings’ was burnt accidentally” (Letter 590 <http://libguides.colby.edu/ld.php?content_id=1059875> [accessed 17 March 2017]). The volume comprises ‘Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka’ (pp.3-58), ‘Dionea’ (pp.61-103), ‘Oke of Okehurst: or, The Phantom Lover’ (pp.107-91), and ‘A Wicked Voice’ (pp.195-237). ‘Amour Dure’ was first published in two parts in *Murray’s Magazine*, 1.1 (1887), pp.49-65, and 1.2 (1887), pp.188-99. ‘Okehurst’ was first published as *A Phantom Lover: A Fantasy Story* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1886). A version of ‘A Wicked Voice’ was first published as ‘A Culture Ghost: or Winthrop’s Adventure’, *Fraser’s Magazine* (January 1881), pp.1-29, with a version in French (‘Voix Maudite’) following in *Les Lettres et les arts*, 2.8 (1887), pp.125-153.

⁴⁴⁶ *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.51

⁴⁴⁷ ‘Seeing Nothing’, p.111

⁴⁴⁸ Angela Leighton, ‘Ghosts, Aestheticism, and “Vernon Lee”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28.1 (2000), 1-14 (p.1)

⁴⁴⁹ *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p.xvi

⁴⁵⁰ Where possible, I draw from non-fiction works that are most contemporaneous with *Hauntings*, and so most reflective of discourse network 1890. Analyses tracking the development of Lee’s ideas through her oeuvre include Townley’s ‘Vernon Lee and Elitism’ and Kristin Mahoney’s work on Lee’s attitude towards the First World War (‘Vernon Lee at the

Hauntings depicts art-objects as actors in our experience of history that, if not treated with care, threaten entirely to take over that experience after even the briefest of casual encounters. Of those explored thus far, Lee's art-objects are the most active and yet the most concealed, their "rules of execution" incisively effective and yet obscured by their own result: haunted encounters. However, the positioning of the reader as a second-order observer of the encounters of others helps him establish a critical distance that was difficult to obtain when reading the ekphrastic poetry of Michael Field and Rossetti. Thus, the "operational script" of the cultural technique of encounter can be seen more easily.⁴⁵¹

Critics have read the majority of Lee's haunted characters as facets of her own personality. In a psychoanalytic reading, Pulham calls Lee's artist narrator in 'Oke of Okehurst: or, A Phantom Lover' the "counterpart to Lee's public persona".⁴⁵² Christa Zorn agrees that Lee's narrators are "obsessive writers and scholars as Lee herself surely was",⁴⁵³ and Martha Vicinus also reasons that, in 'Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka', Spiridion's "delusions are an extreme version of Lee's own intellectual passions".⁴⁵⁴ Meanwhile, in reading Lee's stories through the lens of gender, several critics align Lee with her female characters. Burdett Gardner suggests that Alice Oke and Medea da Carpi can be seen as Lee's doubles, a reading with which Pulham's *Transitional Object* concurs.⁴⁵⁵ Extending this idea, Stefano Evangelista suggests that "the revenges of the past narrated in *Hauntings* are Lee's revenges on the male aesthetes' treatment of gender in their writings", and this has support from Sondeep Kandola in her short

Margins of the Twentieth Century: World War I, Pacifism, and Post-Victorian Aestheticism', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 56.3 (2013), 313-42). Work such as Gillian Beer's 'The Dissidence of Vernon Lee: *Satan the Waster* and the Will to Believe' highlights the *avant garde* nature of some of Lee's later works, with "splicing" from "film and gramophone" in *Satan the Waster* (in *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, ed. by Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 107-31 (p.109)).

⁴⁵¹ Cornelia Vismann, 'Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty', trans. by Ilinca Iurascu, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 83-93 (p.87)

⁴⁵² *Transitional Object*, p.142

⁴⁵³ *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), p.140

⁴⁵⁴ "'A Legion of Ghosts': Vernon Lee (1856-1935) and the Art of Nostalgia', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10.4 (2004), 599-616 (p.612)

⁴⁵⁵ *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of "Vernon Lee"* (New York: Garland, 1987), p.335; see, for example, *Transitional Object*, p.122 and p.130

biography of Lee.⁴⁵⁶ Much work has also been done to bring to the fore Lee's attraction to, and relationships with, other women. Pulham suggests that Lee uses the "mythic, metamorphic beings, embodied in 'objets d'art'" in order to "explore her sexual and social personae in a 'safe' space", while Vicinus reads Lee's work as "displacing her powerful homoerotic feelings onto an imagined past".⁴⁵⁷ While useful for our understanding of Lee as an author, this array of biographical readings of Lee's work fails to get to the crux of what her stories do, and how they show art-objects operating. While Evangelista's line of argument resembles my own in relation to Michael Field, I do not read *Sight and Song*, and do not propose to read *Hauntings*, as allegorical. In particular, the cross-identification of Lee with both the male narrators whom her tales supposedly punish *and* the female characters whom they supposedly empower suggests a limit to the allegorical biography (or biographical allegory) that we can read into the volume.

Visions of history

As we know, art-objects encountered in or through literature produce observer effects in the same way as art-objects encountered in real life, although the observer effects produced by reading Rossetti's 'For Spring' and seeing Botticelli's *Primavera* are, of course, different. Lee argues for something like the observer effect when she speaks of the artist's experience in seeking to produce a future meaning—a "definite and enduring shape"—for their vision of the past described in *Faustus*, going on to suggest that "we have all of us the charm wherewith to evoke for ourselves a real Helena".⁴⁵⁸ By drawing on our knowledge of the past, that is to say, by recurring to past meanings, she argues that we can each imaginatively produce a "real" ghost for ourselves, a new present and future meaning for, and representation of, that past. However, Lee also caveats our imagining of the future cultural meanings of that figure by arguing that we are restricted by the "condition" that "we seek not to show" our

⁴⁵⁶ 'Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp.91-111 (p.107); *Vernon Lee* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2010), p.25, p.41

⁴⁵⁷ *Transitional Object*, p.xix; "'Legion of Ghosts'", p.599

⁴⁵⁸ 'Faustus and Helena', p.104

“real Helena” “to others, and remain satisfied if the weird and glorious figure haunt only our own imagination”.⁴⁵⁹ Lee’s essay suggests a restrained observer effect, one that centres predominantly on the creative, aesthetic pleasure of the observer in the melding of past and future vision, in the absence of a clear means for communicating imagined future meanings to others.

Lee’s work is thus deeply informed by her belief, shared with Rossetti, in each individual’s capacity to achieve an observer effect, and to this end she also deploys “networks of cultural allusions” upon which her “anticipated reader” can draw.⁴⁶⁰ However, while on balance Rossetti’s work was optimistic about the encounter with art-objects because of the creative outcomes of the observer effect, Lee’s *Hauntings* presents a pessimistic case. In ‘Et in Arcadia’, Lee argues that “desire, or let us call it less pompously, the *power of wanting*, is also *the power of creating*”, and that mentally we create “not ... duplicates, but rather, in many instances, revised, perfected copies”, of both places and people, which “simulacra—who knows?—shape into their own resemblance their poor living originals, abashed, divinely strengthened by their recognition”.⁴⁶¹ Lee’s description of the action of the “power of wanting” describes recursion, with past and future versions developing in a cyclical relationship. She also, however, suggests that there are unpredictable effects on the “originals”, or other intermediate results in the recursive chain. The results of our recursions and observers effects may thus fight back. While Rossetti challenged the control of the artist or author over their work’s future meanings, Lee questions the observer’s control.

Thus, *Hauntings* explores not so much the turning back of the desired, created future meaning, the “perfected copies”, on their “originals”, but their turning back upon those who create them through the observer effect. For many of the observers in her stories, the cultural technique of encountering art-objects is one that they struggle to effect productively; instead, their haunted encounters with art-objects are threatening and dangerous, giving rise not to a “terrible and delicious sensation”, as for Lee’s imagined *fin-de-siècle* reader of

⁴⁵⁹ p.105

⁴⁶⁰ Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p.147

⁴⁶¹ ‘Et in Arcadia’, in *The Enchanted Woods, and Other Essays on the Genius of Places* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1905), pp.311-321 (pp.317-19, original emphasis)

“sceptical posterity”, but merely “terrible sensations” such as our “ancestors” in previous eras might have experienced.⁴⁶² Although Lee’s characters are late-nineteenth-century figures, then, their encounters with art-objects refuse them the security of their scepticism or critical detachment.⁴⁶³ Rather, Lee’s stories rely on what Russell P. Sebold has called “*el casi creer*”, or almost-belief, an element of most modern fantastic stories that involves the “astonishment or horror of sceptical characters and readers upon feeling moved to believe in things whose marvellous nature contradicts convention or natural physical possibilities”.⁴⁶⁴ The past that features in Lee’s stories is indifferent to the “almost” of that sensation, to the scepticism of moderns, and so Spiridion, Magnus, William, Waldemar and others are shown to be vulnerable to being overwhelmed by art-objects and the desire to try to show their “real Helena” to the world. As Leighton proposes, Lee’s ghosts “have no designs on their readers’ or victims’ beliefs”, such as provoking a faith in the supernatural; rather, “the readers and viewers ... have designs on the ghosts”, which are “objects of strange, anachronistic desire” that would display them and the future meanings imagined for them through the observer effect.⁴⁶⁵

Hauntings suggests that destruction follows when an observer becomes trapped in the observer effect, obsessed by the past meanings of an art-object and unwilling to accept what Lee sees as the inevitable futility of their efforts to fix its future ones. Lee’s haunted characters reach back into history in order to seek out the past meanings of seductive art-objects, but fail either to make the return journey in order to construct future meanings that can be shared with others, as we might expect, or to hold that ghost solely as an image in their own imagination, as Lee advocated. Trapped by their fascination with the past art-object, Lee’s observers confuse their private vision of it with their lived reality. Few of Lee’s characters survive these haunted encounters, which often result in dangerous physical manifestations.

⁴⁶² ‘Preface’, *Hauntings*, p.vii

⁴⁶³ Spiridion writes in 1885, de Rosis’ letters span 1873 to 1887, Okehurst is situated in 1880, and there is no hint that ‘A Wicked Voice’ significantly pre-dates these tales.

⁴⁶⁴ *Bécquer en sus narraciones fantásticas* (Madrid: Taurus, 1989), pp.21-2; “*el asombro u horror de los personajes y lectores escépticos al sentirse llevados a prestar fe a sucesos cuya maravillosa índole está en contradicción con cualquier concepto convencional de la posibilidad física natural*” (my translation).

⁴⁶⁵ ‘Seeing Nothing’, p.111

The first fatality of the volume is the principal narrator of ‘Amour Dure’, a young Polish historian who arrives in Italy already “wedded to history, to the Past”.⁴⁶⁶ As Carol Mavor has argued, “all historical research ... feeds upon a desire to know, to come closer to the person, object, under study”.⁴⁶⁷ This reduction of physical distance comes dangerously true for Spiridion with regards to the Renaissance figure Medea da Carpi.⁴⁶⁸ When he first arrives in Urbania, he describes her in a list of similar female figures: “women like Lucrezia Borgia, Vittoria Accoramboni, or that Medea da Carpi”.⁴⁶⁹ Medea is “that Medea” because she is the one of the three whom he has ‘observed’ directly in his research, to whom he can metaphorically point. However, the demonstrative determiner establishes a distance between Spiridion and his mental image of Medea, which diminishes as he becomes haunted by her and she becomes increasingly “real”: he begins to worry that he “can’t free [him]self from the thought of this Medea da Carpi”.⁴⁷⁰ The shift from “that” to “this” demonstrates an inexorable movement towards Medea and the impossibility of Spiridion “free[ing]” himself from her, even linguistically in his own diary.

The almost gravitational pull that Medea exercises on Spiridion psychologically, increasingly dominating his thoughts, is paralleled in the story by Spiridion’s contact with portraits of Medea and her personal effects, those other material traces of her life. Early in the narrative, Spiridion describes Medea as a “strange figure of a woman” that had “appeared” to him “from out of the dry pages of Gualterio’s and Padre de Sanctis’ histories” of Urbania.⁴⁷¹ At this point, we can imagine that Spiridion’s impressions of Medea have been

⁴⁶⁶ ‘Amour Dure’, p.6

⁴⁶⁷ *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p.16

⁴⁶⁸ Spiridion’s haunting by a Renaissance figure suggests a cycle of hauntedness. As Eastham has noted, Hellenist aesthetes such as Pater saw the Renaissance as a world in which “the Greek world reappears as a spectral ideal, haunting the [Renaissance] present in a state of suspended manifestation” (*Aesthetic Afterlives*, p.44). Lee’s ghosts seem to be chosen from a set of choice periods that came to be laden with past and present meaning in the nineteenth century. Medea derives from the Renaissance; Dionea from Classical Greek antiquity itself; Christopher Lovelock from the mid-seventeenth century, and the period of John Donne’s poetic triumphs (in ‘Seeing Nothing’, Leighton uses a line from Donne—“some lovely glorious nothing I did see”—as one of the two epigraphs, although she does not make explicit the relevance of Donne’s work as significant intertexts for many nineteenth-century authors (p.99)); and Zaffirino from the eighteenth-century musical milieu, which particularly fascinated Lee.

⁴⁶⁹ ‘Amour Dure’, p.21

⁴⁷⁰ p.22

⁴⁷¹ p.8

wholly formed from textual sources, as the portraits of her that he describes all seem to be in Urbana,⁴⁷² but even now he does not “evoke” Medea, as ‘Faustus and Helena’ describes. She “appear[s]” physically, a “figure” that emerges from his readings, and Spiridion focuses on “hunting” for portraits of her, presumably in order to test his vision of her against the ‘reality’ of portraiture.⁴⁷³ These art-objects appear necessary to his full imagination or understanding of Medea and her history, to stabilising the “figure” before his mind’s eye.

The narrative elides his encounters with the three portraits of her that he finds in his first month in Urbana, their influence left for us to deduce from Spiridion’s early diary entries, but the pivotal encounter, the moment at which his thinking about Medea becomes wholly physical rather than textual, is given in great detail. He is not, at that moment, “hunting” for images, but merely “passing” through a corridor of the Archive when he encounters a “grand” portrait of Medea and she is brought into his space by a mirror. His “eye was caught by a very beautiful old mirror-frame”, and when he approaches the mirror to look at its frame, he “looked also, mechanically, into the glass”. In the mirror image, there is “a figure close to [his] shoulder, a face close to [his]”, “hers! Medea da Carpi’s!”. Spiridion expects this to be a supernatural encounter, expects to find a ghost beside him, but instead, he finds a portrait that overshadows all of those he has previously encountered, showing “the *real* Medea, a thousand times more real, individual, and powerful”.⁴⁷⁴ While her “splendour” and “intensity” are “immeasurably superior” to the images that he has seen before, the portrait is similar in character to those prior images, as Medea’s features are “the same”: “eyelids, a little tight across the eyes; the same lips, a little tight across the mouth”, echoing previous descriptions of her eyelids being “just a little too tight”, and her mouth “also ... is a little too tight”.⁴⁷⁵ This is intensified by the greater rigidity introduced by the staging of the portrait: she is “seated stiffly”, “sustained ... almost rigid” by her clothes, which are themselves of “stiff” fabric made “stiffer” by the embroidery and beading, while

⁴⁷² Spiridion describes a miniature, a marble bust and a painting of Medea as Cleopatra a little over a month after arriving in Urbana (p.16).

⁴⁷³ p.16

⁴⁷⁴ pp.31-2, emphasis mine

⁴⁷⁵ p.33, p.17

her face is sculptural, her forehead “white and hard, like alabaster”.⁴⁷⁶ This greater rigidity suggests a solidification of Spiridion’s image of the “real” Medea, marking the moment when the spatial and temporal distance between Spiridion and Medea contracts entirely, and she joins him in his present. As in Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*, a *Stimmung* of fixity also denotes a termination of the observer effect. Spiridion is trapped with what he has already imagined and no longer has any power to imagine new future meanings; those that he has already imagined merely escalate into material forms.

Accordingly, Spiridion’s idea of how to avenge Medea against Duke Robert transitions from the textual to the physical, demonstrating his obsession with bringing his imagined future meanings for Medea’s story to bear in the world. Initially, Spiridion intends to enact his revenge on Duke Robert textually: “Aha! my good Duke Robert, you shall be shown up in my history; and no amount of silver idolinos shall save you from being heartily laughed at!”.⁴⁷⁷ When he conceives of a new method of revenge by destroying the Duke’s totem, his revenge is phrased in structurally the same way, but has a new, physical character: “Aha! Duke Robert, you forced her to die unshriven ... You too shall taste what it is to wander after death, and to meet the dead whom one has injured”.⁴⁷⁸ Duke Robert’s humiliation becomes a corporeal experience, “taste”, “wander[ing]”, “meet[ing]”, while “the dead whom [Medea] has injured” come unbidden to Spiridion as he seeks to carry out this task. Spiridion’s relationship with the other men bewitched by Medea shifts from being what Zorn describes as an “ungrammatical” one, “assum[ing] a ‘real’ position as another rival among figures who exist only on paper” to one wherein those “figures” physically obstruct his route to the statue of Duke Robert and advise him against enacting Medea’s revenge.⁴⁷⁹ Spiridion’s haunting by Medea reconfigures his physical space, inviting a range of “real” ghosts to invade it.

⁴⁷⁶ p.32

⁴⁷⁷ p.27

⁴⁷⁸ p.52

⁴⁷⁹ *Vernon Lee*, p.163. The ending of the story, an italicised postscript that details Spiridion’s death by “an unknown hand” (‘Amour Dure’, p.58), brings this full circle, enclosing Spiridion into a text alongside his rivals, where, in truth, they have always been, except on the stage of the reader’s mind’s theatre.

Like Rossetti, Lee demonstrates the importance of attention to the cultural technique of encountering art-objects and the observer effect.⁴⁸⁰ In her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, Lee argues that, without the “life-blood of attention”, musicians of the past may float like “ghosts flocking hopelessly round the sacrificial trench of Odysseus” without ever being able to “speak to posterity”.⁴⁸¹ Attention, however, invites data transmission. Seemingly important to the nature of haunting as Lee describes it, however, is that Spiridion pays attention *accidentally*, unintentionally, seemingly at the behest of the art-object rather than of his own free will. In paying attention to Medea’s portrait, Spiridion does not simply initiate an encounter and begin the observer effect; an encounter is foisted upon him, and he becomes wholly trapped in it and the attendant observer effect. This stunning of Spiridion is total, an exaggeration of the stunning that Rossetti’s art-objects and poems effect upon the observer.

Spiridion’s helplessness is a key feature of Lee’s portrayal of the relationship between observer and material traces of the past, in particular art-objects, that lurk beneath the surface of her tales. In connecting *Hauntings* to Lee’s ideas of empathy, Nicole Fluhr links its title with Lee’s much later remark about writing fiction and the experience of characters, which she calls the “extraordinary phenomenon of a creature being apparently invaded from within by the personality of another creature, of another creature to all intents and purposes imaginary”, a “faculty” of the artist of which everyone has a “rudiment”.⁴⁸² We may imagine, then, that art can be seen as a powerful trigger for that faculty, in particular in those who do not cultivate it as authors do. Fluhr suggests that the stories in *Hauntings* “all involve such invasions”, against

⁴⁸⁰ As in the case of Rossetti, the paying of attention is the first step in a productive recursion. Leighton provides an allusive description of how paying attention functions in Lee’s fiction: “to pay attention is to enter the ‘lumber-room’ of meanings, and to start to order them after one’s own heart” (‘Seeing Nothing’, p.116). Although Leighton’s focus here is on the working of characters’ *desire* in their hauntings, she hits upon an apt metaphor for the observer effect, producing new meanings from the old ones available in the “lumber-room” of shared cultural allusions.

⁴⁸¹ *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (London: A.C. McClurg, 1908), p.xlv

⁴⁸² ‘Empathy and Identity in Vernon Lee’s “Hauntings”’, *Victorian Studies*, 48.2 (2006), 287-94, p.288, citing Lee’s ‘On Literary Construction’, in *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1923), pp.1-33 (p.22)

which Lee's characters struggle to defend themselves.⁴⁸³ Maxwell and Pulham note this aggressive presencing of the past in the same terms, suggesting that the stories in *Hauntings* might, indeed, be used to derive an operational script as they "explain how the present is violently invaded by the Italian past",⁴⁸⁴ which has often been linked to Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* and the common sense in *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism that "culture's present [wa]s infinitely permeable and infiltrated by its past".⁴⁸⁵ All of these formulations emphasise the passivity of individual subjects, and so we find ourselves in want of a specific or concrete actor beyond "the Italian past".

The answer that Kittler and critics of cultural techniques would suggest—media—is the same as the one given by Zorn, who also refigures the process of invasion. She suggests that art-objects "evoke fantastic moments that push the past into the present", flipping the sense of movement so that the past does not invade or haunt, does not return, but is returned by the art-objects and the "fantastic moments", or observer effects, that they evoke.⁴⁸⁶ For Lee's individual observers, however, such a "push[ing]" amounts to the same thing, as there is no human control over the emergence of the past into the present. However, this reformulation highlights that we are again dealing with encounters, observer effects, and the operation of media and cultural techniques, and so have specific tools with which to understand and examine haunting or "invasions".

'Absent' art-objects

Before beginning to examine Lee's other stories in this light, it is worth examining an apparent discrepancy with *Hauntings* that may suggest a case of a theoretical hammer in want of a nail. On first reading, it can appear that *Hauntings'* physical art-objects are tangential to the volume's narratives, which instead highlight a psychological phenomenon, such as an excess of

⁴⁸³ 'Empathy and Identity', p.288

⁴⁸⁴ 'Introduction', in *Vernon Lee*, ed. by Maxwell and Pulham, pp.1-20 (p.10). Their formulation here is slightly inaccurate, but little hangs on the adjective "Italian".

⁴⁸⁵ Rachel Teulosky, 'Walter Pater's *Renaissance* (1873) and the British Aesthetic Movement', *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga <http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=rachel-teukolsky-walter-paters-renaissance-1873-and-the-british-aesthetic-movement> [accessed 17 March 2017], para.5

⁴⁸⁶ *Vernon Lee*, p.147

imaginative power. So, for example, despite destroying the portrait of Zaffirino that initiates his haunting, tearing it “into half a dozen shreds” that “float away”,⁴⁸⁷ Magnus remains obsessed by Zaffirino and the imagined sound of his voice. Even at the end of the story, long after destroying the portrait, he reflects that he remains “wasted by a strange and deadly disease”, in that he “can never lay hold of [his] own inspiration”.⁴⁸⁸ The presence or absence of the art-object seems to have little bearing on the extent or experience of his being haunted.

Although focusing on the psychological elements of Lee’s stories is a perfectly reasonable line of inquiry, I argue that it is the only action of art-objects upon Lee’s characters that gives rise to the disastrous observer effects that threaten them. Lee’s art-objects need not dominate her stories in terms of word count—or even characters’ explicit preoccupations—in order for them to play a determining role in the worlds that Lee builds. What is important about these art-objects is their nature as material traces of the past, which have “absorb[ed] atmospheres and moods” and can “later offer them up for experience in a new present”, “mak[ing] present a moment of the past” in all its “foreignness” through *Stimmung*, materialised in the lightest possible touch of ghosts that are not *quite* asomatous.⁴⁸⁹ Mary Patricia Kane, in distinguishing Lee’s work from Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*, notes that her “haunted portraits”—meaning ‘portraits’ here in the broader sense of the stories themselves—“foreground the occulted presences”, the “absorb[ed] atmospheres and moods”, “that have been left lurking in the dark margins of history”.⁴⁹⁰

While Kane’s reference to “portraits” and “presences” is metaphorical, it can usefully be read literally to apply to art-objects. Paintings and sculptures are usually on the margins of our living spaces; placed against the walls or in the corners of homes and public places, they are a part of our physical experience that is often only acknowledged subconsciously. While poetry might, as in

⁴⁸⁷ ‘A Wicked Voice’, p.217

⁴⁸⁸ p.237

⁴⁸⁹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.16, p.15

⁴⁹⁰ *Spurious Ghosts: The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee* (Rome: Carocci, 2006), p.23. The idea of something emerging from the dark recalls Pater’s image of the Renaissance as a time when, “in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil” (*The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p.146).

Gumbrecht's description of Shakespeare's sonnets, result in a "making-present" when recited, there is no such activating act under the subject's control in this case.⁴⁹¹ Lee's art-objects are "actively present" in the sense that Wolfgang Ernst argues for old films that have been reactivated "in the technical moment of transmission" as "electromagnetically induced process[es]", resulting in the simultaneous perception of past and present.⁴⁹² That her physical art-objects require no activation is, thus, an advantage that they have over both literature and their more modern counterparts.

Kittler describes a less empowered model that, I think, describes well the circumstances of Lee's characters. In an essay, he writes that "messages (*Nachrichten*), as is evident from its German etymology, are commands that people are expected to follow (*'nach' denen Personen sich zu 'richten' haben*)", and "people are not objects but addresses".⁴⁹³ In analysing Kittler's first assertion, Winthrop-Young identifies Kittler's allusion to Warren Weaver's commentary on Claude Shannon's theory of communication and the 'effectiveness' problem: whether the message is effective—or not—in affecting the conduct of the receiver. Weaver states:

[I]t may seem at first glance undesirably narrow to imply that the purpose of all communication is to influence the conduct of the receiver. But with any reasonably broad definition of conduct, it is clear that communication either affects conduct or is without any discernible and probable effect at all.⁴⁹⁴

That is to say, physical art-objects can only be said to have transmitted their data when they have influenced the observer, as those communicated messages are commands to be followed. In the case of Spiridion, then, the data transmitted from the grand portrait of Medea is a set of commands that then remain with him, influencing all his actions thereafter. In this way, Spiridion was

⁴⁹¹ *Stimmung*, p.40

⁴⁹² 'From Media History to *Zeitkritik*', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 132-146 (p.139)

⁴⁹³ 'Geschichte der Kommunikationsmedien', in *Raum und Verfahren*, ed. by Jörg Huber and Alois-Martin Müller (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1993), p.170, translated and cited with the German references in Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, 'Silicon Sociology, or, Two Kings on Hegel's Throne? Kittler, Luhmann and the Posthuman Merger of German Media Theory', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13.2 (2000), 391-420 (p.409).

⁴⁹⁴ Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Information* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), p.97

an “address” to which the commands were sent, and constant contact with, or attention to, the art-object is unnecessary.

The moment of such transmission need not be as dramatic as Spiridion’s encounter with the portrait of Medea. The influence of art-objects on the body is often through our peripheral vision and the ways in which they fill space, absorbing or reflecting sound, heat, or light, as they have a particular capacity for producing *Stimmung* by influencing our thoughts and behaviours unconsciously, with the lightest of bodily influences. Leighton also notes this *Stimmung* in Lee’s fiction, arguing that the form of “the ghost story literalizes the formal metaphors of Lee’s aesthetic theory” so that “rhetorical or fictional ghosts” that arise from art-objects “hover in an atmosphere of insistent physicality and verbal nuance, which is the atmosphere of her own writing style”.⁴⁹⁵ So, for example, the portrait of the original Alice in ‘Okehurst’, although it is in the house’s central space and has a key role in the unfolding of the tale, is remarked on only infrequently, like the colour of the house’s walls or wooden fixtures. These components form part of the very fabric of the house, lurking in the “margins” that are “dark” because they are so rarely attended to. The same features become too part of the “dark margins” of our conscious experience, “lurking” in our peripheral vision and influencing our thoughts and feelings just below our conscious perception, just like the Oke family’s history and the dark story of the murder of Christopher Lovelock.

The materiality of such encounters is of particular importance to Lee,⁴⁹⁶ reflecting not only Gumbrecht’s interpretation of *Stimmung* as a physical phenomenon and “aesthetic experience” as a “tension-filled simultaneity of effects of meaning *and* effects of presence”,⁴⁹⁷ but also the fact that as a cultural technique, encounter at its core is about the interactions between bodies and objects. As Evangelista notes, Lee “places great emphasis” on the fact that her aesthetic “insights are contingent on the time she has spent in the presence

⁴⁹⁵ ‘Seeing Nothing’, p.112

⁴⁹⁶ I focus largely on objects’ materiality, rather than the physicality of the human body. For further discussion about the physical experience of looking at art-objects and reading literary texts, see for example, Benjamin Morgan’s ‘Critical Empathy: Vernon Lee’s Aesthetics and the Origins of Close Reading’, *Victorian Studies*, 55.1 (2012), 31-56, and Catherine Anne Wiley’s “Warming Me Like a Cordial”: The Ethos of the Body in Vernon Lee’s Aesthetics’, in *Vernon Lee*, ed. by Maxwell and Pulham, pp.58-74.

⁴⁹⁷ *Stimmung*, p.7

of the art works she discusses”,⁴⁹⁸ in particular those of Italy.⁴⁹⁹ Leighton similarly highlights the importance of material traces in forming Lee’s approach to aesthetics and to history, as she developed her “passion for actually seeing and touching the things of that time” as a young woman copying out airs in the Bologna music school while preparing *Studies of the Eighteenth Century*.⁵⁰⁰ Leighton argues that “the touch of old manuscripts” “rouse[d Lee’s] craving for the past”, as well as “then releas[ing the past’s] ghostly presences”.⁵⁰¹ That experience seems also to have informed *Hauntings*; Kane notes that “Medea’s letters give Spiridion that emotion in the physical contact with objects from the past that so fascinated Lee in her writings on aesthetics”.⁵⁰² Meanwhile, Vineta Colby reflects on a later instance from Lee’s biography that emphasises the importance of even fleeting physical contact with art-objects that serve as a creative inspiration, or rather transmit to us commands that result in an observer effect: “During her visit with [Browning] in August 1885 he showed her the Old Yellow Book, his source for *The Ring and the Book*”, about which Lee said “‘It seemed absurd, but it moved me much more to think that this was the book out of which the great poem had come, than that the man who was showing it me had written the poem’”.⁵⁰³ Objects, rather than people, act as inspiration. Lee’s writings emphasise the action of *things*, particularly art-objects, as independent

⁴⁹⁸ ‘Vernon Lee in the Vatican: The Uneasy Alliance of Aestheticism and Archaeology’, *Victorian Studies*, 52.1 (2009), 31-41 (p.34). In this respect, Lee’s aesthetic project resembles Michael Field’s, and her emphasis on actual personal encounter may derive from the same urge to certify her writings with authority.

⁴⁹⁹ Several critics have written specifically about Lee’s relationship with Italy. See, for example, Maxwell’s ‘Vernon Lee and the Ghosts of Italy’, in *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*, ed. by Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp.201-21 and Tess Cosslett’s ‘Revisiting Fictional Italy, 1887-1908: Vernon Lee, Mary Ward, and E.M. Forster’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 52.3 (2009), 312-28. Similarly, Leire Barrera-Medrano has written about the effect of Lee’s 1889 visit to Spain on her writings, such as ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ (1889) (“‘Dolls in Agony’: Vernon Lee in Southern Spain”, *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 83 (2016) < <https://cve.revues.org/2457> > [accessed 17 March 2017]).

⁵⁰⁰ Leighton, ‘Ghosts’, p.3, citing Lee’s *Studies*, p.xxi. Pulham has argued that Lee’s ghosts have “early relations” or “physical counterparts” in art-objects that lend the ghosts “a solidity” so that “they become ‘art-objects’ in their own right” (*Transitional Object*, p.xvi).

⁵⁰¹ ‘Ghosts’, p.4

⁵⁰² *Spurious Ghosts*, p.28

⁵⁰³ *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p.81, citing Beatrice Corrigan’s, ‘Vernon Lee and the Old Yellow Book’, *Colby Quarterly*, 5.6 (1960), 116-22, p.118

of their creators and, to an extent, the subject immediately before them, who is a mere address.

In analysing Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Oval Portrait', Friedrich Kittler argues that "historical phantasms ... are directly based on technologies".⁵⁰⁴ While, for him, the media technologies that produce ghosts are predominantly technical, the *camera obscura* and *lanterna magica*, which can fool the human senses, Lee's work invites us to consider how some of the oldest media technologies, writing, painting, and sculpture, serve the same function. Her "historical phantasms" are based on these particular types of material traces of the past, which "linger in the present", seemingly of their own accord, remaining longer than might seem strictly necessary in order to impose their seeming historical facticity onto an observer.⁵⁰⁵ Lee dwells on the invasive threat that art-objects can pose to the unprotected observer in 'A Child in the Vatican' by imagining a child's encounter with the Vatican's galleries of statues.⁵⁰⁶ As in *Hauntings*, this imagining includes personifying the art-objects and attributing specific malice to their supernatural action. Lee suggests that statues "are merely stone imprisoned demons, dethroned gods of antiquity", "bent upon getting some small amount of amusement in their dreary lives" because they are "sick of the bitter amusement of watching the follies of their pretended or deluded worshippers".⁵⁰⁷ Despite arguing that the child, who is utterly alienated from such sculptures, finds that "they are not ghosts, they are things which, for aught the child knows or cares, have never been born and never will die", she describes the "spell" of those statues upon the singled-out child, who "little by little" finds "strange symptoms", "a vagueness, a want; a seeking, a clinging, but seeking for, clinging to the unknown".⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁴ *Optical Media*, trans. by Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p.140

⁵⁰⁵ Athena Vrettos, "In the clothes of dead people": Vernon Lee and Ancestral Memory', *Victorian Studies*, 55.2 (2013), 202-11 (p.210)

⁵⁰⁶ Lee argues that a child is more vulnerable than adults whose ideas about art are full-formed, whereby, in "going to a gallery of sculpture, we must be prepared to isolate what we wish to enjoy, to make for it a fitting habitation in our fancy: it is like going to read a page of Homer, or the Georgics, or Shelley, in some great musty, dusty library" ('A Child in the Vatican', in *Belcaro*, pp.17-48 (p.18)). We could certainly argue that, in *Hauntings*, there is something childlike or immature about all of the protagonists who find themselves haunted, be it their young age, as with Spiridion, or their naive good nature, as with William Oke.

⁵⁰⁷ p.24

⁵⁰⁸ p.21, p.25, p.26

Invading is the overtly aggressive complement of the euphemistic haunting that comprises such “strange symptoms”, which resemble what Gumbrecht calls the “yearning” for *Stimmung* that is “a yearning for presence”, and “perhaps a variant that presupposes a pleasure in dealing with the cultural past”.⁵⁰⁹ Framing the experience of being haunted in terms of an invasion, being overcome by a yearning for *Stimmung*, suggests both persecution by a persistent presence, and a denial of agency in turning the subject’s own mind or body against them. In her reading of Lee’s theory of empathy, Renate Brosch argues that the action of the observer, their “participatory agency”, means “a resistance to absorption by the referential content of an art work”.⁵¹⁰ However, *Hauntings* shows that the observer’s “resistance” to being absorbed in the work of inspecting the specific imagery and technique of a single art-object is a very cursory protection against being invaded by the art-object that can lurk in the “dark margins” of our physical and imaginative lives.

As part of its set of metaphorical accounts of Spiridion’s invasion or haunting by Medea, ‘Amour Dure’ also relies on the ideas of intoxication and illness (mental and physical) to describe this denial of agency to the subject.⁵¹¹ After his encounter of Medea’s “grand” portrait, Spiridion “begin[s] to fear” that living “all alone in a strange country” has made him “morbid”.⁵¹² His earlier casual remark about the change in his personality from thinking about Medea—“Am I turning novelist instead of historian?”—is replaced with greater fears about his mental stability, and he dwells on cases of mental illness in his family tree.⁵¹³ The encounter with the portrait results in a “state of excitement” that he

⁵⁰⁹ *Stimmung*, p.20

⁵¹⁰ ‘Looking at Women Looking: Female Portraits in the Gender Crisis’, *Gender Forum*, 13 (2006), 1-9, <<http://genderforum.org/imagendering-ii-issue-13-2006/>> [accessed 17 March 2017], p.8

⁵¹¹ The idea of reading having a bodily or psychological effect on readers is well examined in more traditional literary criticism. In his examination of the roots of close reading, Morgan asserts that “Victorians read books with their bodies” and examines how such “embodied reading bec[a]me so distasteful” (‘Critical Empathy’, pp.31-2). Meanwhile, in her work on Sensation fiction of the mid-nineteenth century, Clare Pettitt notes a similar effect of reading on the body, with such fiction “even produc[ing] a machinery of plot that threatens to work mechanically on the reader”, raising hairs on the back of our necks, for example (“‘The annihilation of space and time’: literature and technology”, in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.550-572 (p.562)).

⁵¹² ‘Amour Dure’, p.31

⁵¹³ p.22, later reflected on pp.44-6

himself calls “ridiculous”, but which he is powerless to contain.⁵¹⁴ Similarly, his earlier visit to Rocca Sant’Elmo, the former villa of Duke Robert where Medea was confined, disturbs his mind so much that he wonders whether his visions of Medea can be attributed to “the punch which my professor insisted on drinking after dinner”.⁵¹⁵ From our detached vantage point, however, we can recognise that he is influenced by an art-object on the “dark margins” of the villa, the beautiful “large marble fireplace” that features an image of a woman that he takes to be Medea.⁵¹⁶ As Vrettos notes, recursion, the “imaginative immersion in the past”, is “an experience with the power to induce altered states of consciousness”.⁵¹⁷

This intoxicating quality of the past in Lee’s stories aligns with Kittler’s insight into the effect of the medium of literature. He argues that silent reading transformed the subject into an imaginative image-making machine, which skill he correlates with the hallucinatory effect of “elixirs and drugs”.⁵¹⁸ This follows his argument that media technologies, such as the letterpress and *camera obscura*, can be compared to intoxicating drugs such as “hashish” because they are intended to fool the senses,⁵¹⁹ and indeed, in ‘Okehurst’, the narrator describes the effect of the house and its aesthetic trappings on him as “the half-drunkenness of opium or haschisch”.⁵²⁰ In Lee’s stories, then, media work their effects in tandem with their broader physical location, which affords them margins and shadows in which to work. Zorn argues that “by visualizing historical time synchronically (rather than diachronically) in one and the same place”, be it Okehurst, Venice, or Urbania, “Lee develops a psychology of the ‘genius loci’ dominated by movements of repetition and disruption”, and places “like memories, submerge the collectively forgotten past, which yet comes to haunt individuals unconsciously”.⁵²¹ The analogy between the “psychology of the ‘genius loci’” and the process of recursion is clear, and Zorn’s description of place as like memory, a store of past meanings, suggests the added strength of

⁵¹⁴ p.31

⁵¹⁵ p.30

⁵¹⁶ p.29

⁵¹⁷ ‘Ancestral Memory’, p.206

⁵¹⁸ *Optical Media*, p.109

⁵¹⁹ p.100

⁵²⁰ p.120

⁵²¹ *Vernon Lee*, p.151

art-objects being situated in 'original' locations, which is of particular importance in this set of stories. In *Juvenilia*, Lee writes that "the present ... requires, in order to remain, a layer or two of the past, unseen, perhaps, but which gives it body, and tone, and stability".⁵²² The past acts as a dark margin around the present, giving it body and form, fixing it in place, while going essentially "unseen". To Lee, this is "require[d]", and it highlights the dual nature of the observer effect, the simultaneous perception of past and future, which can be thought of as a "remaining" present.

The dominance of the past

The nature of haunting, however, is that the past comes to overwrite, rather than underwrite, the present, by means of forcible intoxication and imposed commands. This overwriting of the present is particularly clear in 'A Wicked Voice', when Magnus' creative consciousness is invaded by the story of Zaffirino, an eighteenth-century opera singer. This psychological invasion, this haunting, is mirrored by the threat of a physical illness, a "fever" arising out of places, Venice and Mistrà, that are rendered unwholesome by the submerged dark shadow of eighteenth-century opera.

'A Wicked Voice' is framed as a narrative written by Magnus with the intention "to tear [it] up, to throw [it] unread into the fire" so that, as the manuscript burns, "the spell may be broken".⁵²³ We can therefore expect the story to express the full force of Magnus' feelings, an outpouring in order to increase the potency of this counter-spell, and accordingly the Norwegian composer expresses antipathy both toward eighteenth-century music and toward Venice and its contemporary musical circles.⁵²⁴ He expresses distaste for Venice's "heat and closeness", seeming to "swelter", while a "miasma of long-dead melodies" rise from its "shallow waters", a "moral malaria, distilled ...

⁵²² 'The Lake of Charlemagne', in *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887), pp.23-76 (p.69)

⁵²³ p.197

⁵²⁴ Several critics have discussed the musical aesthetics expressed in this story, such as Maxwell in her 'Whistlerian Impressionism and the Venetian Variations of Vernon Lee, John Addington Symonds, and Arthur Symonds', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 40.1-2 (2010), 217-45, Pulham in 'The Castrato and the Cry in Vernon Lee's Wicked Voices', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30.2 (2002), 421-37, and Carlo Caballero in "'A Wicked Voice": On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music', *Victorian Studies*, 35.4 (1992), 385-408.

from those languishing melodies”.⁵²⁵ It is this “miasma” that he blames for the slow “sicken[ing] and intoxicat[ion of his] soul”.⁵²⁶ However, we are able more accurately to locate the cause of his haunting in an encounter with an art-object when the residents of Magnus’ pension assemble to “examin[e] stupidly the engraving” brought to him by an etcher trying to sell it, a scene that Magnus “see[s]” and “hear[s]” again as he describes it in writing.⁵²⁷ However, he dissociates himself from his own part in that evening because, he first suggests, of the effect of Venice’s “cursed heat” and “moonlight nights” that have “unstrung” him, as though he were an instrument being taken apart. Suggesting the interplay between places and art-objects, Magnus attributes to the place the fact that “the sight of this idiotic engraving, the mere name of that coxcomb of a singer”, makes his “heart beat and [his] limbs turn to water like a love-sick hobbledehoy”.⁵²⁸

On closer inspection, Magnus’ apparently instinctive loathing of the eighteenth century and its style—“How flat and vapid and vulgar it is, to be sure, all this odious eighteenth century!”—is tempered by an interest in the figure of Zaffirino, “not so utterly vapid”, but “almost beautiful”, a face that Magnus feels he has “seen” before, “if not in real life, at least in my boyish romantic dreams, when I read Swinburne and Baudelaire”.⁵²⁹ Almost immediately upon encountering that art-object, Magnus has uncovered a set of past meanings for it, including some that are the result of a highly personal recursion, which are then combined with newly learnt past meanings.

Despite his avowed lack of interest in the Count’s story of Zaffirino’s life, Magnus seems to have followed it closely, given the detail of his retelling. When the Count suggests that Magnus sing the *Aria dei Mariti*, supposedly fatal when sung by Zaffirino, Magnus is struck by “senseless rage” that “send[s] the blood to [his] brain and mak[es him] mad”. He loses sight of everything but Zaffirino’s portrait and begins to sing instead the *Biondina in Gondoletai*, “the only song of

⁵²⁵ ‘A Wicked Voice’, p.208, p.197

⁵²⁶ p.208

⁵²⁷ pp.198-9

⁵²⁸ p.200

⁵²⁹ p.206. Pulham traces the commonalities between some of the haunting figures in Lee’s short stories and the writings of Swinburne and Baudelaire, reading Zaffirino in particular as tied to the “transgressive sexuality” of Baudelaire’s ‘Femmes damnées’ and Swinburne’s ‘Faustine’ (‘Castrato’, p.434).

the eighteenth century which is still remembered by the Venetian people”.⁵³⁰ This response suggests that the Count’s story has invaded Magnus’ imagination, and that in this moment he realises it convulsively and unconsciously. Although Magnus intends consciously to resist the portrait’s *Stimmung* and refuse to sing what may “lend physical presence” to the “vanished world” of Zaffirino, he nevertheless finds himself “making-present” that world by falling instinctively into his eighteenth-century song.⁵³¹ Magnus chooses perhaps one of the few such songs that he is likely to hear again,⁵³² and when he realises, again perhaps unconsciously, the threat that he now faces, Magnus stops and “shake[s his] fist at this long-dead singer”, declaring, “Ah! you would like to be revenged on me also!”, “You would like me to write you nice roulades and flourishes, another nice *Aria dei Mariti*, my fine Zaffirino!”.⁵³³ As Gumbrecht describes of poetry that is “called forth to new life” when read aloud, Magnus’ song “strike[s his] bod[y]” both from “without” and “like a touch from the inside” in the “images and meanings” that it conveys.⁵³⁴ His angry response aligns him with the Procuratessa who disdained Zaffirino when he was still alive.

However, the form of revenge that Magnus imagines suffering is of a quite different form. The Procuratessa died of love for the sound of the singer, but the equivalent punishment for Magnus would be forcing him to write in the style of eighteenth-century composers he claims to loathe. Whilst the Procuratessa’s illness is physical, a bodily invasion, Magnus’ invasion is creative or psychological, a shift that suggests that haunting itself is recursive and contains predefined variations, and that the commands of the art-object that Magnus has encountered are different from the ones imposed on the Procuratessa by Zaffirino’s aural art.

That night, Magnus dreams of the Procuratessa’s death, emphasising the idea that haunting itself may be recursive, and he carries with him into his

⁵³⁰ ‘A Wicked Voice’, p.207

⁵³¹ Gumbrecht, *Stimmung*, p.39-40

⁵³² As indeed he does one later evening, much to his fury, as it interrupts his work (‘A Wicked Voice’, p.218).

⁵³³ pp.207-8. It is interesting stylistically that in this, and in Spiridion’s apostrophised declarations of revenge in ‘Amour Dure’, the format, “Ah! you ...!” is used, compounding our sense of Magnus and Zaffirino in conflict.

⁵³⁴ *Stimmung*, pp.39-40

waking hours “the distant echo of that voice, of that long note”, which prevents his working.⁵³⁵ This first invasion, however, seems to pass. There is a break in the narrative, of duration unknown, and Magnus begins again with an exposition of the sensation of an artist in the moments before inspiration strikes. In this receptive mood, Magnus takes a gondola ride, but when in “yet an instant” he expects his mind to “be overwhelmed by that savage music” of his hero, Ogier, instead there is “suddenly” the sound of an enchanting voice—implicitly Zaffirino’s—that comes “cleaving, chequering, and fretting the silence with a lace-work of sound even as the moon was fretting and cleaving the water”.⁵³⁶ The verb choices are suggestive, figuring the sound of Zaffirino’s voice like light: illuminating in a way that produces difference, changing one’s perceptions of the world.⁵³⁷ Indeed, the voice replaces Magnus’ “vision of heroic days” as he might wish to represent them in his opera with “multitudes of little stars of light”. Implicitly, the monolithic story of Ogier, static and well known, is shattered—“cleaved”, perhaps—into a myriad of impressions that become mobile and interactive, “chasing and interlacing”.⁵³⁸ This, in other circumstances, might be an inspirational moment of the observer effect, the past meanings of the story of Ogier dismantled and ready to be assembled anew. However, Magnus becomes stuck in this moment of disintegration. He is unable to undertake the work of producing future meanings because he has instead been invaded by the eighteenth-century music that Zaffirino represents, his creative present overwritten by someone else’s creative past.

After the sound dissipates, Magnus says that he “fell once more to meditating on [his] opera”, but then corrects himself. He “realise[s his] delusion” upon hearing that “exquisite” voice once again “ar[ising] from the midst of the waters”, just like the “miasma” that he fears.⁵³⁹ Abandoning hope of inspiration for his opera, Magnus seeks out cacophony rather than listening to the note of Zaffirino’s, going to Florian’s and paying musicians to “scream and scrape their

⁵³⁵ ‘A Wicked Voice’, p.212

⁵³⁶ p.213

⁵³⁷ This continues throughout his description of that night, with an extended metaphor of the voice’s crescendo “beaming” and “break[ing] itself in the / luminous facets of a wonderful shake” (pp.214-5).

⁵³⁸ p.213

⁵³⁹ p.214

utmost”: “I felt the need of noise, of yells and false notes, of something vulgar and hideous to drive away that ghost-voice which was haunting me”. Despite this attempt at a curative, Magnus’ “work [i] s interrupted ever and anon by [his] attempt to catch its imaginary echo”.⁵⁴⁰ In a bid to escape it, he escapes Venice, travelling to Mistrà, where the Procuratessa died. *En route*, he feels freed, “as if [he] had left an intolerable burden behind”, and as if to speed on this cure, he again seeks out tuneless music, a mass at St. Anthony’s in Padua that “heighten[s]” his “good spirits” so much that he wishes to listen to it a second time.⁵⁴¹

This hopeful turn to the patron saint of lost things, however, proves a futile effort to recover his lost creativity. Returning to the church, Magnus finds it virtually shut up, populated by a few devout individuals and “a voice” that physically overwhelms him, his hair “clammy”, his knees weak, and “an enervating heat spread through [his] body”, his haunting escalating into physical symptoms. He feels “supremely happy, and yet as if [he] were dying”, then left with a chill and “a vague panic”.⁵⁴² That “vague” feeling echoes the “thought [that] suddenly loomed vaguely in [his] mind” and persuaded him to visit Mistrà.⁵⁴³ Magnus is unable to articulate, or even consciously acknowledge, the impetus that drives the choices that, we sense, are taking him towards Zaffirino, rather than away from him.

Mistrà, too, is unsafe. Standing at an open window, Magnus finds his “head suddenly filled as with the fumes of some subtle wine”. Intoxicated, he reflects on treacherous and possibly infectious things that it has in common with Venice: “weedy embankments”, “stagnant water”, “malaria”.⁵⁴⁴ Magnus’ inability to comprehend what haunts him is a key part of the past’s invasion of his mind. He is haunted by the “collectively forgotten past” that “haunt[s] individuals unconsciously”, which has been able to invade him through the specific channel of Zaffirino’s portrait and its commands to him to write music like that of the eighteenth century. Lee’s “psychology of the ‘genius loci’” disrupts the course of

⁵⁴⁰ p.216

⁵⁴¹ p.222

⁵⁴² p.225

⁵⁴³ p.222

⁵⁴⁴ p.230

Magnus' life in order to overwrite his future creativity with that of the past: the composer's head is "filled with music" that is "certainly" his, "since [he] ha[s] never heard it before", but which he disowns with a fierce hatred, recognising it as also the music of the past. Thus, he argues that he has "satiated [Zaffirino's] lust for revenge"—a revenge that he, Magnus, invented—and calls for "pity". Yet he wishes not to be able to "lay hold of [his] own inspiration" again, but to hear "one note, only one note of thine, O singer, O wicked and contemptible wretch".⁵⁴⁵ This apostrophe ends the story, and the volume, with a plea to the past to put forth its own meaning, which Magnus cannot fashion into a new piece of art through an observer effect. Lee argues that "only changing things can answer to our changing self; only living creatures live with us" and that, "once learned by heart, the portrait, be it never so speaking, ceases to speak, or we to listen to its selfsame message", but here it is Magnus who ceases to change, to live, and so he is cursed to always seek for the "selfsame message".⁵⁴⁶

Approaching the sacred past

From 'Amour Dure' and 'A Wicked Voice', then, we see how the threat of haunting, of invasion, may be either mortal or artistic. There are those who are fatally wounded by their invasion, and those who are merely creatively injured. We may divide them according to whether they seek to impose their "real Helena", their ghost, upon the world. Had Magnus written for Zaffirino a new *Aria dei Mariti*, he too might have died of that "long note". In the remaining two stories, 'Okehurst' and 'Dionea', characters fall on either side of this divide.⁵⁴⁷ So, William Oke and Waldemar are fatally wounded, whilst the two narrators—an unnamed artist and De Rosis—are creatively injured. In both cases, the injuries that Lee's characters sustain are an example of what Ellis Hanson has called, in analysing Wilde's work, "exquisite pain", an "aesthetic innovation

⁵⁴⁵ p.237

⁵⁴⁶ 'The Blame of Portraits', in *Hortus Vitae: Essays on the Gardening of Life* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1904), pp.139-47 (p.145)

⁵⁴⁷ A comprehensive list is produced in Table 2, on p.148.

peculiar” to discourse network 1890.⁵⁴⁸ Hanson traces a route of “transgressive desire becom[ing] sorrow, and sorrow becom[ing] art” in Wilde’s letters from prison,⁵⁴⁹ but Lee’s supernatural stories configure these connections somewhat differently: encountering an art-object gives rise to a transgressive desire, which leads to sorrow.

Told in epistolary form by Doctor Alessandro De Rosis, ‘Dionea’ ostensibly tells the history of a foundling child, the titular Dionea, from the time that she becomes the ward of De Rosis’ correspondent, Lady Evelyn, to her disappearance. The first 23 pages of the story take place before the appearance of Waldemar, a sculptor and friend of Lady Evelyn’s who is the most manifestly haunted observer of the tale. De Rosis’ early letters, like Spiridion’s early diary entries, are essential in establishing the context in which the haunting takes place, however. They detail Dionea’s childhood and education at a convent, placing her firmly in the *femme fatale* tradition. In their notes on Algernon Charles Swinburne’s ‘Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence’, Maxwell and Pulham draw attention to the influence on Lee’s stories of Swinburne’s descriptions of *femmes fatales* in the work of Michelangelo.⁵⁵⁰ Two key elements of Swinburne’s *femme fatale* are the idea of dreadful beauty, and the affiliation of the woman with snakes or serpentine imagery. Throughout his early letters to Lady Evelyn, De Rosis repeatedly refers to how attractive she is, with “the prettiest face of any little girl in Montemirto”, and as she enters puberty her prettiness evolves and Dionea becomes a “dark, lithe” “beauty”, “with an odd, ferocious gleam in her eyes, and a still odder smile, tortuous, serpentine, like that of Leonardo da Vinci’s women”.⁵⁵¹ This allusion directly to Swinburne’s ‘Notes on Designs’, as well as to Pater’s ‘La Gioconda’, foreshadows the “love misery” that Dionea appears to bring to those around her, and her indifference to it, which is again described as serpentine: De Rosis compares her smile to “a tiny snake’s curves”, and “the

⁵⁴⁸ ‘Wilde’s Exquisite Pain’, in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp.101-25 (p.102)

⁵⁴⁹ p.103

⁵⁵⁰ ‘Appendix A’, in Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Plymouth: Broadview, 2006), pp.279-82 (p.279)

⁵⁵¹ ‘Dionea’, p.67, p.72. Later, De Rosis describes Dionea as “magnificent” when she does manual work, with “beautiful strong arms”, and “walking majestically” with heavy loads (p.80).

twist of a young snake”, with her smile becoming “more ominous” as she grows into adulthood, no longer tiny, but simply “snake-like”, “amused”, and “serpentine”.⁵⁵²

Dionea’s power to make young people fall inappropriately in love echoes the hauntings in ‘Amour Dure’ and ‘A Wicked Voice’. Dionea’s early victims seem to suffer “fever”, just as Magnus and Spiridion did, while her song after providing a love-philter to a young woman—“Love is salt, like sea-water—I drink and I die of thirst”⁵⁵³—echoes Magnus’ final apostrophe to Zaffirino, when he asks, “is it necessary that, at the moment when I curse [you], the longing to hear thee again should parch my soul like hell-thirst?”.⁵⁵⁴ The resemblances between aesthetic and sexual feeling are the subject of much compelling criticism, so I will not labour the point here, except to note the continued comparison between physical and creative life, both of which can be destroyed by a ghost.

It is surprising that De Rosis does not at least connect Dionea with “the deadlier Venus incarnate”, as Swinburne has described the *femme fatale*.⁵⁵⁵ Dionea is expressly aligned with Venus throughout the narrative.⁵⁵⁶ The story of her appearance from the sea in a storm echoes De Rosis’ description of Montemirto as a place where “in times gone by ... a baleful goddess of beauty” arose from the “wicked sea”, “a Venus Verticordia, but in the bad sense of the word, overwhelming men’s lives in sudden darkness”.⁵⁵⁷ When she is punished for a sacrilege at the convent, De Rosis aligns the hurt she might sustain making the cross twenty-six times on the floor with her tongue to “when Dame

⁵⁵² p.74, p.76, p.79, p.87, p.92

⁵⁵³ p.77, p.88

⁵⁵⁴ ‘A Wicked Voice’, p.237

⁵⁵⁵ ‘Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence’, in *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), pp.314-57 (p.320)

⁵⁵⁶ For a deeper exploration of the figure of Venus in Lee’s work, including the Venus imagery set out in *Hauntings* and the relationship between the works of Heine, Pater and Lee, see Maxwell’s *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

⁵⁵⁷ ‘Dionea’, p.62. The community in which Dionea appears to live, if we are to trust De Rosis’ depiction of it, seems to be decidedly Pagan in character, with “half the population” having “names as unchristian” as Dionea’s own (p.65), fear of the Evil Eye being widespread, and many of the residents resorting to Dionea’s “philters” (p.85). Lady Evelyn, too, De Rosis describes as “I fear but a Pagan woman” (p.67).

Venus scratched her hand on the thorn-bush”.⁵⁵⁸ As well as her power to make people “fall in love with each other”,⁵⁵⁹ her powers of self-protection, too, are godly, with Sor Agostino struck by lightning after Dionea warns him “that if he did not leave me alone Heaven would send him an accident”.⁵⁶⁰

De Rosis does not seem wholly unaware of this omission in his story of Dionea, however, but, as though something were lurking on the edge of his subconscious, there are suggestions of him accepting what might be called a ‘Pagan’ response to Dionea, in particular as he interacts further with Waldemar. Having observed Waldemar’s sculpture being created, De Rosis remarks, “How strange is the power of art!”, hypothesising that Waldemar’s work has “shown [him] the real Dionea”, so that now when he encounters her he “cast[s] down [his] eyes after the first glimpse of her loveliness” “with a sort of religious awe”.⁵⁶¹ A few days later, Waldemar visits De Rosis and, after “mechanically turning over the manuscript, the heap of notes of my poor, never-finished book on the Exiled Gods”,⁵⁶² encounters the “Venus altar”, which has delivered to his studio in an abandoned temple of Venus and treats religiously, as though responding to its commands, pouring a libation over it when it is delivered.

However, De Rosis never makes the important leap between the actions of Waldemar, responding to Dionea as a goddess, and his own work. In his very next letter to Lady Evelyn, De Rosis confesses that he “fear[s]” that “there is nothing to discover” regarding the gods in exile, that “poetry is only the invention of poets, and that that rogue, Heinrich Heine, is entirely responsible for the existence of *Dieux en Exil*”, through an observer effect that De Rosis and his “poor manuscript” can never achieve.⁵⁶³ De Rosis utterly fails even to take the first step by undergoing a recursion, instead allowing the fact of Dionea’s divinity to lurk at the dark margins of his consciousness, despite noting the tale of Venus reappearing as one of the sources for his book, and arguing that the Pagan gods can’t *not* continue to exist.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁵⁸ p.73

⁵⁵⁹ p.74

⁵⁶⁰ p.82

⁵⁶¹ p.95

⁵⁶² p.97

⁵⁶³ p.98, referring to *Gods in Exile: an essay by Heinrich Heine* (Pasadena: Castle Press, 1962).

⁵⁶⁴ ‘Dionea’, pp.82-3

When Waldemar and his wife, Gertrude, arrive, then, we as readers are prepared for a display of Dionea's insidious power. When he arrives, Waldemar's specialism is sculpting "men and boys, athletes and fauns"⁵⁶⁵ because "woman is not form, but expression, and therefore suits painting, but not sculpture". Waldemar concedes the beauty of classical female statues, but argues that "those are not women", but "goddess[es]".⁵⁶⁶ It is Waldemar's wife who finds him his "goddess" in Dionea. De Rosis indicates that "I shall insist on speaking to [Dionea] ... to urge her to refuse [the] proposal", articulating his objections to the scheme as born of concern for Dionea and her modesty.⁵⁶⁷ Yet, we cannot help but wonder whether they in fact are more closely aligned with the suspicions about Dionea's influence that led him to refuse to send Dionea to Lady Evelyn.⁵⁶⁸ Despite De Rosis' misgivings, when Waldemar and Dionea are brought together, the agreement appears inevitable, and it appears as though Waldemar has glimpsed the possibility of creating a worthy statue modelled on a woman whom he seems to recognise as a goddess-in-exile.

Dionea thus tests the formula of Lee's stories that haunting begins with encountering an art-object. As a goddess, Dionea's inherent supernatural power, to create or punish or love, functions in a similar way to the commands of an encountered art-object. Art and religion, particularly Pagan religion, are aligned as having similar powers and effects. Although we have little to go on regarding Waldemar's experience of encountering Dionea, we can extrapolate from his behaviour as recorded by De Rosis. It is worth noting that, in his conversation with De Rosis prior to meeting Dionea, Waldemar dismisses the possibility of finding a female model worthy of sculpting with "savage gleam of his eyes", which Lady Evelyn terms "a gleam of latent ferocity", leading us to wonder whether Waldemar already secretly harbours hopes that he might be like "the people who made" those classical statues, for whom "a goddess might sit".⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁵ p.84

⁵⁶⁶ p.90

⁵⁶⁷ p.91

⁵⁶⁸ "I cannot send her to your Excellency ... although your boys are still in sailor-clothes and your uncle, the Cardinal, is eighty-four; and as to the Prince, why, he bears the most potent amulet against Dionea's terrible powers in your own dear capricious person" (p.81).

⁵⁶⁹ p.90

What begins as understandable professional ambition shades, at some undefined point in the narrative, into a haunted observer effect, however, as Waldemar begins to lose control of his emotions,⁵⁷⁰ and succumbs to a “craze” for decorating his studio as closely as possible to the temple of Venus that it once was, using artificial light to illuminate the room in “the way in which the ancients lit up the statues in their temples”, as well as the discovered “Venus altar”, which he uses as a pedestal for his statue.⁵⁷¹ In the terms that Zorn used to describe Spiridion, Waldemar makes himself “ungrammatical”, as “ungrammatical” as Dionea is as a goddess-in-exile, first by seeking to position himself alongside those ancient sculptors of goddesses, and secondly by seeking to recreate the atmosphere of the former shrine. We can view his arrangement of his studio as an effort to make Dionea’s presence, which might seem anachronous, instead seem wholly fitting, and so give his work the same *Stimmung* as classical statuary. These attempts to get too close to the past, and to art’s past meanings, prove fatal, however, reaching their crude apogee (or nadir) in his sacrificing of Gertrude upon the “Venus altar”, where she is found “lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes of the incense, her blood—she had but little to give, poor white ghost!—trickling among the carved garlands and rams’ heads”.⁵⁷² It is perhaps his wife’s inadequacy that finally prompts Waldemar, in despair, to his own death. He has become fatally trapped by his desire to follow the backward step of recursion to its furthest limit.

In ‘Okehurst’, we have the clearest example of how the cultural technique of encounter at times becomes so oft repeated, so reliant on *Stimmung* and communication from the dark margins, that we do not even learn about the encounters of two of the main characters—William and Alice—at all. We can only intuit that it is the art-objects depicting their ancestors and Lovelock that affect them so, such as when Alice describes her belief that “William would have [liked to have] those two portraits [of the original Alice and her husband] taken down and burned” if not for her opposition and the fact that to do so

⁵⁷⁰ His “violent ... love of [Dionea’s] mere shape” (p.94) provokes literal violence when he judges that his sculptures cannot match her beauty; an “odd spark of ferocity dilated in his eyes, and seizing the largest of his modelling tools, he obliterated at one swoop the whole exquisite face”, prompting “poor Gertrude” to blanch and convulse (p.96).

⁵⁷¹ p.101

⁵⁷² p.102

would draw their neighbours' attention to that story from the family's past.⁵⁷³ Lee expects us to understand from such suggestions the influence of such repeated exposure, which accords with the description by Walter Sickert of the "test of a portrait", which is "not whether it attracts attention on the walls of an exhibition, but how far it succeeds, in the house where it is meant to live, in telling its story of sympathy and comprehension through years of silent appeal".⁵⁷⁴ We can understand William and Alice, then, as affected by these years of "silent appeal" and the *Stimmung* thus generated.

In reading 'Okehurst' after 'Dionea', we can draw close affinities between William and Waldemar, and the unnamed narrator and De Rosis. While William is slowly smothered and driven to madness by the ghosts of his ancestors and Christopher Lovelock, the unnamed narrator of 'Okehurst' struggles just as De Rosis does to make progress with his creative work. While William is so terrified of becoming trapped with the past that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, the narrator's sensation of "the half-drunkenness of opium or haschisch" that he first experiences at Okehurst never fully wears off, so that he seems indifferent to the fact that he "somehow could never get beyond preparatory sketches with her", even keeping a count so that he can declare that he was making the "hundred-and-thirtieth of [his] preparatory sketches".⁵⁷⁵ He tells his interlocutor this so matter-of-factly that it appears a brag, an indication of his fineness of feeling that despite his inability to move beyond preparatory sketches, he was still fully himself, and fully an artist, echoing how De Rosis blames Heine's supposed dissimulation for his own failed literary project.⁵⁷⁶ What is primarily of interest in 'Okehurst', however, is the third person experiencing an observer effect, Alice, who experiences a haunted encounter with art-objects that is apparently stable, successfully reworking her family's history into her own life in a remarkable observer effect that seems to epitomise Lee's advice in 'Faustus and Helena'.

Okehurst itself is a "magnificent intrinsically" and "admirably preserved" "example of an old English manor-house" that everywhere depicts the Oke

⁵⁷³ p.133

⁵⁷⁴ *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Anna Gruetzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.168

⁵⁷⁵ 'Okehurst', p.175

⁵⁷⁶ p.98

family history, with “rows of family portraits, reaching from the wainscoting to the oaken ceiling”, “heraldic monsters” along the staircase’s parapet, “the wall covered with oak carvings of coats-of-arms, leafage, and little mythological scenes”.⁵⁷⁷ Just like the house, which is a “complete” and “out-of-the-common-run” example of its type, the narrator finds that Alice has “something so complete” about her, that is “so completely unlike every one else”.⁵⁷⁸ I suggest that this is because she has succeeded in conjuring “real ghosts” whom she is happy never to share with the world, reflected in the long periods that she spends alone in the yellow drawing room or the grounds of the house, as well as her casual indifference to both the perception of her as a duplicate of her ancestress—“If I am like that Alice Oke, why I am”—and the possibility that William will “get to believe” in Lovelock: “Why not? If he sees him, why he sees him”.⁵⁷⁹ This detachment and calm attitude towards the observer effect suggests that Alice has succeeded in bringing her “real Helena” (Lovelock) about in a way that is impressively stable and so cannot understand why others may not do the same.

For William, however, the tale of Lovelock not only haunts him, but also represents a noise about himself that he wishes fervently to conceal. I suggested in my Introduction that ‘Okehurst’ is an example of how the generalised awareness of noise in discourse network 1890 is shown in the literature of the period, arguing that William’s enthusiasm for the portrait-painting project, compared to his wife’s indifference, reflects his anxiety and latent susceptibility to the overwhelming haunting that leads to the story’s dramatic ending. The fact or risk of noise about the individual being made visible has permeated Lee’s story as a *Stimmung*.

By contrast, for Alice, that noise is not noise at all, in the technical sense, but is a past meaning of her ancestor’s portrait, clothes, and effects that she recovers in her recursion. Eastham interprets William as a hysteric and Alice a historicist for whom “originality and imitative modelling” are not contradictory.⁵⁸⁰ She, for example, seems to revel in narrating Lovelock’s poetry, feeling it at

⁵⁷⁷ p.117

⁵⁷⁸ p.119, p.121

⁵⁷⁹ p.132, p.176

⁵⁸⁰ p.59, p.54

once as a family artefact full of past meaning, but also as though the poems were for her, an impossible but paradoxically stable future meaning. She touches those papers with “delicate and reverent fingers”, and although he claims to be unmoved by the poems, which she reads “as one might fancy a woman would read love-verses addresses to herself”, the narrator *is* moved to paint her in the same attitude as when she read them aloud to him, saying, “I felt it was the only thing I could do”.⁵⁸¹

There is a complicated reciprocal relationship here between image and text. The narrator is seeking to capture Alice in her role as a visual technology, a special sort of *camera obscura* that projects both internally—as a reader, as Kittler would have it—and externally—as an obsessive with access to her ancestress’ clothes—images of her ancestress that are evoked both by Lovelock’s poetry and the portrait of the original Alice. It is as though the narrator’s painting becomes a second-order art-object, like Waldemar’s attempted statue of Venus-turned-as-Dionea as Venus *per se*. Neither can be completed, illustrating the unusual nature of Alice’s success, which relies on her willingness not to seek to *fix* her observer effect’s future meanings. By contrast, Lee’s other tales, haunted characters express frustration at being unable to control the interpretation of that which haunts them. Spiridion brims with anger at his sceptical colleague, and the children for whom Medea is a witch, and Magnus is furious at his fellows who appreciate the tale of Zaffirino or the song he sang.⁵⁸² Similarly, William, though he tries to conceal it, is deeply troubled by the views that others may hold on Lovelock, such as believing the story harmless or thrilling.

It may be for this reason that the narrator blames Alice for William’s haunting, suggesting that she has introduced the noise that troubles him to his life, or otherwise exacerbated it. However, several critics have addressed the moral responsibility of the narrator for the tragedy at Okehurst. For example, Colby suggests that the narrator “fails to engage himself, and consequently the reader, in his characters until it is too late”,⁵⁸³ while John Clute argues that the tragedy is “a direct consequence of the narrator’s creation of the story that he

⁵⁸¹ pp.145-6, p.149

⁵⁸² ‘Amour Dure’, pp.30-1, p.35; ‘A Wicked Voice’, p.207

⁵⁸³ p.236

needs for his art”.⁵⁸⁴ Such suggestions that the narrator might have rescued the situation, or produced it deliberately, however, seem to me to attribute too much agency to the narrator, ignoring the *Stimmung* of Okehurst and the operations of the art-objects that lurk within. Instead, I agree with Kane’s reading that the “very presence” of the narrator “as observer changes the equilibrium in th[e Okes’] relationship, tipping the balance in favour of Alice’s fantastic imagination to the disadvantage of William’s desire for rational explanations” because he considers the story of Lovelock interesting information, rather than troubling noise.⁵⁸⁵ This is supported by the fact that it is not until the theatrical masquerade, when the story of Lovelock’s murder is broadcast more widely, that William’s obsession with believing Lovelock is present and somehow seducing Alice reaches its final, destructive level. The increasing visibility of the noise of the Oke family becomes too much for William to tolerate. Although he does not deliberately seek to share his observer effect with the world, it is done against his will, and he suffers the consequences of it.

Conclusion

As Lee depicts it, haunting is the invasion of the observer by the commands of the art-object: revenge me, worship me, believe in me and what I have done, create music for me. The subject is denied any critical distance from the art-object; even the most sceptical viewers can be invaded, whether they perceive the art-objects commands’ as information, as do Spiridion and Waldemar, or noise, as do William and Magnus. Although an observer effect is possible, the observer is an object of the process by which future meanings are obtained, and such future meanings are controlled so firmly by the art-object that efforts to communicate them lead to destruction.

Lee’s observers are *camera obscuras*, then, for the art-objects with which they have haunted encounters. Yet the art-objects are not satisfied merely with their visual form in the observer’s mind’s eye; they also gain a form of presence through the *Stimmung* that they preserve and release as material

⁵⁸⁴ ‘Vernon Lee’, in *Supernatural Fiction Writers*, ed. by E.F. Bleiler (New York: Scribner, 1985), pp.329-335 (p.332)

⁵⁸⁵ p.39

traces of the past. As aesthetic experiences, encounters with these art-objects are “tension-filled”, simultaneously involving “effects of meaning” and “effects of presence”,⁵⁸⁶ but the latter overcomes the former, with what Bill Brown calls “the idea of encounter” overtaken by the “suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power”.⁵⁸⁷ By overwhelming the observer’s hermeneutic thinking and overpowering “effects of meaning”, Lee’s art-objects release ghosts that exert “effects of presence” that are “terrible”, and sometimes “delicious”, to her haunted characters.

In these supernatural accounts, encounter has become less a matter of acculturation or developing “cultural efficacy”, and more a matter of unavoidable immersion in the past.⁵⁸⁸ The “distributive, and hence collective” “cognition” that Sybille Krämer envisages as arising from cultural techniques becomes instead the invasion of the “collectively forgotten past”.⁵⁸⁹ Lee imagines a sort of end to the cultural technique of encountering art-objects as “cultural” at all, at an extreme where the control of art-objects over the subject has reached a climax. This is a case of what Vismann has described as “things hav[ing] had their own share in ensuring that the instrumental perspective may not be used to adequately describe their case”, but “in their resistance against serving specific purposes” “lay[ing] claim to a different kind of perception”.⁵⁹⁰

Owing to *Hauntings*’ diversity, Table 2, overleaf, attempts to document the pasts that haunt Lee’s characters through various ghostly figures, as well as the triggers for those hauntings that act from the “dark margins” of her stories, the “presence” those ghosts gain in their manifestation, and the outcomes for Lee’s characters.

⁵⁸⁶ Gumbrecht, *Stimmung*, p.7

⁵⁸⁷ ‘Thing Theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 (2001), 1-22 (pp.3-4)

⁵⁸⁸ Markus Krajewski, ‘The Power of Small Gestures: On the Cultural Technique of Service’, trans. by Charles Marcrum, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 94-109 (p.94)

⁵⁸⁹ ‘Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques – Moving Beyond Text’, trans. by Michael Wutz, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 20-29 (pp.26-7)

⁵⁹⁰ ‘Sovereignty’, p.86

Table 2 – The ghosts and pasts of *Hauntings*

| Story | Ghosts | from... | haunting... | encountered via... | manifesting as... | causing... |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| Amour Dure | Medea da Carpi | Renaissance Italy | Spiridion Trepka (historian) | Documentary evidence and a set of portraits, most significantly the “grand” portrait in the archives | Visible, physical and audible signs | Destructive rage; jealousy; artistic incapacitation; suicide* |
| | Medea’s former lovers | | | Documentary evidence | Physical and audible signs | Rage and frustration |
| Dionea | “The deadlier Venus incarnate” | Classical Roman mythology | Waldemar (artist) | Dionea | Physical embodiment (believed) | Obsessive artistic behaviour; death |
| | | | Alessandro De Rosis (writer) | | Physical embodiment (denied) | Artistic incapacitation |
| Okehurst [§] | Christopher Lovelock | Seventeenth-century England | Alice Oke (landowner) | Family lore; his portrait; poems and other documentary evidence | Visible and audible signs* | Unknown |
| | | | William Oke (landowner) | Family lore and costumes; his portrait;† Alice Oke’s appearance and behaviour | Visible and audible signs* | Neurosis; homicidal rage; madness; death |
| | Alice Oke (the first) | | Alice Oke (landowner) | Family lore and costumes; her portrait; her own appearance | Unknown | Unknown |
| | | | Unnamed narrator (artist) | Her portrait; Alice Oke’s appearance | Inexpressible qualities in Alice Oke | Obsessive artistic behaviour; artistic incapacitation |
| A Wicked Voice | Zaffirino | Eighteenth-century Venice | Magnus (composer) | A portrait engraving | Audible signs; dreams | Artistic incapacitation |

[§] As discussed in the earlier close reading, ‘Okehurst’ poses a particular challenge. It strikes me that the unnamed narrator is not troubled by the ghost of Christopher Lovelock, but is creatively incapacitated by the ghost of Alice Oke (the first). On the other hand, William Oke does not seem troubled by the ghost of Alice Oke (the first), but by the lover associated with her, Lovelock. Both ghosts seem to be present to Alice Oke, although we cannot be sure about the precise nature of their manifestations.

[†] Alice Oke seems to suggest that her husband does not know of Lovelock’s portrait, or his poems, in the yellow drawing room, but her intimation that he must take responsibility for them because they were found in his house hints at how these objects can influence us subconsciously, from the dark margins (p.148).

* Owing to the narrative structure of the story, these summaries are speculative.

This table summarises the conclusions that I have drawn from my close readings, and so illustrates in a condensed forms the commonalities across Lee’s stories. In particular, it suggests that the frequent interpretation of the overwhelming of subjects by art-objects as a form of divine (authorial) punishment is flawed. Most interpretations of *Hauntings* as conveying a single ethical message about the treatment of the past rely on the fact that, as Peter Gunn argues, Lee was strongly convinced of the “ethical value” of literature.⁵⁹¹ For example, in valorising Pater’s aestheticism in her essay ‘Valedictory’, Lee refers to “art not for art’s sake, but as one of the harmonious functions of existence”,⁵⁹² and in the much later “‘Imagination Penetrative’”, she writes of “how works of fiction can act for good or evil”, albeit caveated as “in the abstract”.⁵⁹³ Vicinus suggests that Lee “promulgated a distinctive vision of the writer as one responsible for the improvement of his or her readers”, a “decidedly moralistic project”.⁵⁹⁴ However, the improvements that *Hauntings* might intend are not readily discernible, and I suggest that readings of *Hauntings* as moralistic each fail because they do not attend closely enough to the destruction that art-objects and the cultural technique of encounter wreak.

For example, Kristin Mahoney reads Lee’s characters as modelling an ethical response to art-objects, “a mode of ethical consumption that reinvigorates degraded objects” and “morally mediates aestheticist hedonism, basing pleasure on the acknowledgment of difference”.⁵⁹⁵ Yet, in fact, such sensitivity appears to be a weakness. Spiridion and Waldemar are destroyed, while the morally compromised unnamed narrator and the invective-filled Magnus can hardly be described as consuming art-objects ethically, or restoring degraded objects to their former glory. Other arguments for a definitive ethical message fail similarly. Thus, Evangelista and others have suggested that *Hauntings* wreaks Lee’s revenge on male aesthetes, but this reading stumbles when the two surviving narrators who are most oblivious to the true nature of

⁵⁹¹ *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.115

⁵⁹² in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1896), pp.233-60 (p.259)

⁵⁹³ in *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London and New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1923), pp.273-286 (p.281)

⁵⁹⁴ “‘Legion of Ghosts’”, pp.602-3

⁵⁹⁵ ‘Haunted Collections’, p.50. Dennis Denisoff similarly suggests that *Hauntings* seeks to teach ethical principles regarding productivism (‘Vernon Lee, Decadent Contamination and the Productivist Ethos’, in *Vernon Lee*, ed. by Maxwell and Pulham, pp.75-90).

the women whom they meet—De Rosis and the unnamed narrator of ‘Okehurst’—are relatively unharmed by the tragic events that surround them.

I sympathise with Elizabeth Mahoney’s intuition, in her review of Maxwell and Pulham’s edited volume, that “if we pay too much attention to one Lee, we may lose sight of another”, losing track of the various facets of her work in an effort to locate harmony, particularly between our own political concerns and hers.⁵⁹⁶ This echoes Lee’s own criticism of Ruskin, suggesting that his “two very noble missions:—the creation of beauty and the destruction of evil” were each “warped and hampered” by “his obstinate refusal to compromise with the reality of things”, “clinging to his own belief in harmony where there is discord”.⁵⁹⁷

If we are to take Lee’s *Hauntings* at their word, then, and admit of the reality of things as those stories portray them, I suggest that we abandon efforts to find instructions for how to act within Lee’s stories and instead acknowledge the stark messages they convey about how art-objects act upon us. In this way, it is clear that the stories *do* describe acts of resistance by art-objects, as critics would like to think, but that those acts of resistance are more discordant than we might like to imagine. Haunted encounters seem to carry only one message: that art-objects resist control of their meanings by subjects, whether they be well intentioned or no, and can by their release of previously absorbed *Stimmungen* control and overwhelm an observer. Lee’s stories deny the tractability of such art-objects to determinative observation or stable interpretation by a subject. The art-object resists being operationalised, instead asserting its control from the “dark margins” that it inhabits. This, Lee seems to suggest, we must simply accept as fact, or die trying.

⁵⁹⁶ ‘Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics’, *Victorian Studies*, 50.1 (2007), 108-10 (p.108)

⁵⁹⁷ ‘Ruskinism: the Would-Be Study of a Conscience’, in *Belcaro*, pp.197-229 (p.201)

Chapter 4

The jealous (encounter with the) art-object: Wilde's competitive possession

*It is rather like my own life—all conversation and no action.*⁵⁹⁸

In the previous chapter, I discussed how haunted encounters with art-objects arise from observers becoming subordinated to the “commands” of art-objects.⁵⁹⁹ *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is perhaps the clearest example in *fin-de-siècle* literature of how media both operate according to their own logic and, as Friedrich Kittler puts it, “determine our situation”.⁶⁰⁰ Dorian and his capacity for free will are gradually subordinated to the media logic and commands of his picture.⁶⁰¹ This is not another case of haunting, however. Dorian's encounters with his picture do not give rise to a ghostly presence in his reality. Rather, the functions of media—the repeated transmission and processing of information—dominate the narrative, mimicking Wilde's instinct that the novel was “all conversation”.

In this chapter, my interest is not traditional conversation in the dialogue between characters, but their encounters with the art-object, and how it ‘speaks’ back through data transmission and so acts upon them. The “operational script” of encounter in Wilde's text is to dictate back to the subject an understanding of the self based on the properties of the art-object.⁶⁰² As the recursive chain of encounters progresses, the art-object's data processing and data transmission

⁵⁹⁸ Wilde made this remark about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in a letter to Beatrice Allhusen, which cannot be precisely dated but was written in early 1890 (*The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p.425).

⁵⁹⁹ ‘Geschichte der Kommunikationsmedien’, in *Raum und Verfahren*, ed. Jörg Huber and Alois-Martin Müller (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1993), p.170, translated and cited with the German references in Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, ‘Silicon Sociology, or, Two Kings on Hegel's Throne? Kittler, Luhmann and the Posthuman Merger of German Media Theory’, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13.2 (2000), 391-420 (p.409).

⁶⁰⁰ *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.xxxix

⁶⁰¹ *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). This edition was preceded by a hardback, annotated version of the same text: *The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Annotated, Uncensored Edition*, ed. by Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁶⁰² Cornelia Vismann, ‘Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty’, trans. by Ilinca Iurascu, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 83-93 (p.87)

replace the observer effect as the primary relationship between media and subject, as the visually changing art-object's "interplay" with the observer no longer requires her imaginative work in order to produce future meanings for itself.⁶⁰³

In line with the idea that each encounter with an art-object, each instance of the cultural technique, is productive (in the sense of changing the *status quo* through the operation), encounters in the novel become a thing to be controlled. They are rare, precious, obsessive, and enclosed. The hot-housing of encounter forms part of an oppressive *Stimmung* that characterises the novel. Dorian comes to embody his own observer effect, frustrating all others and almost annihilating recursion entirely. The encounters between the novel's characters and its central art-object are obsessive and possessive, underpinned by jealousy: art-objects are both desired possessions over which characters compete and exalted idols that they compete to imitate. The art-object, however, resists these subjective desires, and the cultural technique of encounter becomes an isolating rather than acculturating force, as it did for Vernon Lee's haunted characters.

This replacement of the observer effect by the art-object's own operations does not mean that recursion is irrelevant with regard to *Dorian Gray*. It is one of the most recursive—and recurred-to—texts of the *fin de siècle*. The critical search for sources for the novel has long been fertile.⁶⁰⁴ Meanwhile, its repetitions continue well into the twenty-first century, not only with screen and stage adaptations, but also in other works that take *Dorian Gray* as their starting point, such as Jean Cocteau's *Le portrait surnaturel de Dorian Gray* (1909), Mishima Yukio's *Kinjiki* (1951), and Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002).⁶⁰⁵ Elisha Cohn has suggested that Wilde employs imitation—a

⁶⁰³ Markus Krajewski, 'The Power of Small Gestures: On the Cultural Technique of Service', trans. by Charles Marcrum, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 94-109 (p.94)

⁶⁰⁴ This trend may flow, as Powell suggests, from the contemporary response to the novel ('Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray: Magic-Picture Mania in Late Victorian Fiction', *Philological Quarterly*, 62.2 (1983), 147-170 (p.147)). Ian Small has dedicated much detailed work to cataloguing critical efforts to trace Wilde's influences, in *Wilde Revalued* (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1993) and *Oscar Wilde: Recent Research* (Greensboro: ELT Press, 2000).

⁶⁰⁵ Intertextual critical readings include Peter G. Christensen's, 'The Three Concealments: Jean Cocteau's Adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *Romance Notes*, 26-7 (1985-7), 27-35; James Raeside's, 'The Spirit is Willing but the Flesh Is Strong: Mishima Yukio's "Kinjiki" and Oscar Wilde', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 36.1 (1999), 1-23; and José Yebra's, 'The "Moving" Lines of Neo-Baroque in Will Self's "Dorian: An Imitation"', *Atlantis*, 33.1 (2011), 17-31.

particular form of recursion—because its “historical nonlinearity” allows him “to avoid worrying over tracing genealogies of thought or identifying a fixed point of origin”, granting him “the freedom of experimentation”.⁶⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Florina Tufescu attributes Wilde’s expertise in “the dissolution of stable meanings and authoritative readings” to his plagiarism.⁶⁰⁷ As Jerusha McCormack has suggested, then, it is “hard to say anything original about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* because there is so little that is original in it”, but what it may lack in original content, the novel makes up for in its nuanced demonstration of how media function.⁶⁰⁸

Without judgment about how Wilde treated his sources, we can say that he was a recursive author in whose works media re-emerge disentangled from their strict place in a chronological timeline or genealogical lineage in order to serve Wilde’s creative demands.⁶⁰⁹ Media, and elements thereof, become free agents in Wilde’s work, and especially in *Dorian Gray*, which dramatises the agency of an art-object and its model, Dorian and the picture (or is it the other way around?).⁶¹⁰ Acknowledging this radical freedom of media and their elements in Wilde’s work, Kerry Powell suggests Wilde draws together the defining features of the magic-picture genre into a single text to show his

Kerry Powell documents the magic-picture stories that followed in the mould of *Dorian Gray* in the 1890s: ‘Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray’, pp.162-3.

⁶⁰⁶ ‘Oscar Wilde’s Ghost: The Play of Imitation’, *Victorian Studies*, 54.3 (2012), 474-85 (p.477), citing Wilde’s ‘The Critic as Artist’, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol. 4, ed. by Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.163-91. Cohn invites a Kittlerian reading of Wilde’s work, as in her argument that “the notion that words and thoughts replicate themselves, without particular living subjects bearing their truths, establishes conditions of possibility for the transmission of Wilde’s ideas in a culture unable to forget his fascinating influence” (p.484).

⁶⁰⁷ *Oscar Wilde’s Plagiarism: The Triumph of Art over Ego* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), p.56

⁶⁰⁸ ‘Wilde’s Fiction(s)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.96-117 (p.110)

⁶⁰⁹ The view of Wilde as a thief, or more charitably as a borrower, of ideas can also be seen in sceptical critical approaches to Wilde’s non-fiction writings, such as Frankel’s suggestion that Wilde’s critical writings are for the most part insincere and “simulate” thought (*Oscar Wilde’s Decorated Books* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.84). Others take Wilde’s non-fiction writings, and his politics, more seriously. Morgan Fritz suggests that Wilde’s revised 1891 version of *Dorian Gray* is a “concrete fictional experiment” for the “abstract utopianism” that Wilde had set out in ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’, ‘The Critic as Artist’, and ‘The Decay of Lying’ (‘Utopian Experimentation and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, *Utopian Studies*, 24.2 (2013), 283-311 (p.283)).

⁶¹⁰ As Christopher Craft notes, “from the moment he speaks” his wish to exchange places with the art-object, Dorian “becomes an artefact” (‘Come See About Me: Enchantment of the Double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, *Representations*, 91.1 (2005), 109-36 (p.113)).

contemporaries how “a tale *ought* to be written”.⁶¹¹ It is this attempt by the novel to say something generally about how media—specifically, magic pictures—operate that is of interest here.

Art structuring life

In reading *Dorian Gray* for its insight into how art-objects operate, I draw on Cohn’s assessment of how Wilde’s imitative creative process demonstrates his “serious commitment to the notion that life is structured by art”, that media “determine our situation”. Cohn argues that, in Wilde’s work, art’s “non-intentional agency” operates “in an unpredictable way not dependent on individual self-determination or genius”,⁶¹² rewriting Friedrich Nietzsche’s insight, oft-quoted by Kittler, that “our writing tools are also working on our thoughts”.⁶¹³ *Dorian Gray* offers us an insight into one way that an observer may respond to the fact of being subjected to the “non-intentional agency” and “structur[ing]” forces of art. It also illustrates the most unpredictable way that art might structure life, taking to extremes the influence that an art-object might have on the course of an individual’s life. Kittler reasons that “so-called Man is not determined by attributes which philosophers confer on or suggest to people in order that they may better understand themselves; rather, He is determined by technical standards”.⁶¹⁴ Literature reflects such truths, and within his fictional confines, Dorian—a “so-called” subject—is limited in his actions by what the art-object is capable of expressing, while his slow discovery of this fact lends the novel its drama.

I note here that I am indebted to the detailed work by Nicholas Frankel in preparing his uncensored version of the novel, both in readily accessible paperback and in a hardback edition with further detailed references and

⁶¹¹ p.154, original emphasis

⁶¹² ‘Oscar Wilde’s Ghost’, p.478

⁶¹³ Such as in *Gramophone*, p.203. For an analysis of Nietzsche’s influence on Kittler’s thought, and that of his rival and contemporary, Marshall McLuhan, see Richard Cavell’s ‘The Tragedy of Media: Nietzsche, McLuhan, Kittler’, in *Remediating McLuhan* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), pp.127-48. For Kittler’s reflections on Nietzsche’s work, see ‘Nietzsche 1844-1900’, in *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp.17-30.

⁶¹⁴ *Literature, Media, Information Systems*, ed. by John Johnston (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1997), p.133

annotations that add to our understanding of the novel's context. This chapter examines that text not because I think that Wilde's initial 'intentions' must necessarily provide the most 'correct' or 'artistically true' version of his text,⁶¹⁵ but because my focus is on how Dorian encounters and responds to his picture, and it is in this version of the text that Wilde's focus on the art-object is strongest. The text as amended for *Lippincott's* and the later novel, as amended by Wilde, tell us much about how its reading audiences might have responded to the descriptions of encounters with the art-object, informed by feared and actual critical responses, but less about those depicted encounters themselves. The immediacy of Frankel's new edition allows us the most direct access to the encounters with an art-object that the novel describes.

Many existing analyses of *Dorian Gray*, even those interested in art-objects, centre interactions between the three main characters, rather than those in which the art-object is directly involved. For example, Patricia Pulham reads portraiture, and "the language of painting", as a "powerful metaphor for the understanding of self and one's relations to others".⁶¹⁶ However, while appearing to centre the art-object narratively, the novel also conceals and isolates it. Pulham is correct that the "language of painting" can be used metaphorically, but we must address head-on the actual painting (to the extent that a literary construct is 'actual'), how access to it is constructed and obstructed, for us and for the novel's characters, and the apparent motivations for those strategies of revelation and concealment.

The narrative concealment of the art-object is fundamental to the novel's power, and again our critical metaphors merit close attention because they illustrate again how we are subject to the art-object's control and deceptions in the same way as the novel's characters. Bényei Tamás proposes that the "allegorical overdetermination" in *Dorian Gray* is "manifest[ed]" in the "telling

⁶¹⁵ Joseph Bristow notes that Wilde's editing process before submitting his manuscript involved "immense care and forethought", including removing reported speech in French between Dorian and his valet, and didacticism about art and realism from his narrator's words ('Introduction', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol. 3, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.xxxv). Thus, even the version submitted to *Lippincott's* is not truly 'original' in the sense of the words as they were put to paper.

⁶¹⁶ *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p.118

lack” of an “ekphrastic attempt in the novel to *describe* the portrait”.⁶¹⁷ Absence, then, generates excess, or critical overcompensation. Wilde’s ekphrastic “gaps” give an overwhelming amount of space for critical observer effects.⁶¹⁸

Meanwhile, Christopher Craft describes this concealment differently, suggesting that “the picture ... steps forth as the most urgently withdrawn visual object in the British literary canon”.⁶¹⁹ This paradox of the personified art-object “step[ping] forth” while being “withdrawn” highlights the autonomy of the art-object that imposes its own logic on the text and the desire of “so-called Man” to identify subjective control—a figure who might “withdraw” the art-object—where there may be none, particularly when Craft later repeats the formulation.⁶²⁰ These critical responses mimic the characters’ responses to the central art-object: its absence from their view allows Basil and Lord Henry—and many others—to believe what they wish to about Dorian, and Dorian’s efforts to withdraw the art-object from easy view does not prevent it from “stepping forth” and imposing itself upon *him*.

This leaves *Dorian Gray* in the unusual position of performing much of the work of an ekphrastic text while avoiding ekphrasis itself. The text’s art-object both “giv[es] a self” “to the character” through “a type of prosopopoeia” and “demonstrat[es] ... literature’s persistent resurrectionist desires—the craving to have the past return livingly, to live again, to speak again”, two features that Valentine Cunningham identifies as traits of ekphrastic texts.⁶²¹ Yet these powers belong to the art-object, and not the ekphrasis; it is the picture that displays the past “livingly”, “speak[ing] again” Dorian’s actions, and not Wilde’s ekphrases of it. What is most illuminating in the case of *Dorian Gray*, then, despite our preconceptions, is not the appearance of the art-object and its descriptions in words by the characters or the narrator, but its actions upon

⁶¹⁷ ‘Double Vision: Some Ambiguities of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, in *Does It Really Mean That? Interpreting the Literary Ambiguous*, ed. by Kathleen Dubs and Janka Kašćáková (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), pp.60-79 (p.60, original emphasis). At any one time, the novel only highlights specific features of the art-object, from Dorian’s beautiful complexion to the spread of blood across the image, but the whole portrait is rarely on show for the reader (*Uncensored*, p.59, p.205).

⁶¹⁸ *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. by Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.265

⁶¹⁹ ‘Come See About Me’, p.120

⁶²⁰ p.123

⁶²¹ ‘Why Ekphrasis?’, *Classical Philology*, 102.1 (2007), 57-71 (p.63). J. Hillis Miller carefully examines prosopopoeia in *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

those who become subject to it. Regenia Gagnier has suggested that the novel is “to a great extent ... about *spectators*, from spectators of the beauty of others ... to ‘spectators of life’, as Wilde called Wotton”.⁶²² Yet, the novel eschews the act and experience of spectating that might be shared through ekphrasis, however, and focuses on the effect on the individual, on Dorian, of *being* only an observer and encountering the art-object.

The mechanics of jealousy

The action of the art-object in the novel depends, I argue, on the emotion of jealousy as aroused in its observers. We can be jealous of an object in two different ways. In the first instance, which we might call avaricious jealousy, we might be jealous of a colleague’s success, or a friend’s new home. We wish to have what they have (and usually a little bit more). In the second, which we might call defensive jealousy, we may jealously guard a piece of information that affords an advantage. We wish to keep what we have and prevent others from taking or sharing it. The lines of ownership and our ancillary emotional responses are distinct in the two cases. In the former, the possession is someone else’s; we are resentful, envious, and desire that which we do not have, harbouring the hope that it might eventually be ours. In the latter, the possession is ours, but it always threatens to exceed our ownership; we are suspicious, fearful, and vigilant in our oversight.

Jealousy can be situated in the context of a more familiar analysis of aesthetes as detached ironists. At first glance, the view of aesthetes as ironists might seem inimical to an analysis of them as the jealous type. However, as Andrew Eastham acknowledges, even while placing Walter Pater and Wilde on a continuum with Romantic irony, that aesthetic irony involves not only “an attempt to emulate the blithe indifference of the art work”, but also “a striving to be more autonomous than art itself”, a “constellation of mimetic desire and envy” that he argues was “allegorized most famously” in *Dorian Gray*.⁶²³ Irony

⁶²² *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), p.57 (original emphasis)

⁶²³ *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.10

perhaps *ought* to be inimical to jealousy, but the aesthete's ironic detachment is a mere performance that conceals avaricious jealousy. Jealousy, particularly avaricious jealousy toward art-objects, is thus a core component of aesthetic irony.⁶²⁴ Jealous desire for the art-object short-circuits any objective or universal Kantian judgment of its beauty separate from its desirability for the individual. As Eastham suggests, the *fin-de-siècle* ironist, "the decadent Aesthete", "aspired to the condition of the most obscure and opaque object", one "perhaps that had not yet been invented, only intimated in relics of the Hellenic past".⁶²⁵ Avaricious jealousy of the art-object's traits is combined with a desire for rarity, to be hidden away and protected, a desire for the mechanisms of defensive jealousy—concealing and withdrawing—to be used to protect one's status as a beautiful object. These characteristics of jealousy can inform our understanding of the encounters that Wilde's three aesthetes have with the portrait.

The first encounter between Dorian and the art-object takes place in Chapter 2, after the painting's conclusion. For much of the chapter, however, Dorian is a passive recipient of Basil and Lord Henry's homoerotic interest, and I would be remiss not to acknowledge the novel's elements of sexual jealousy.⁶²⁶ Of the critical readings of *Dorian Gray* focused on issues of identity, those highlighting Wilde's sexual identity and representations of homosexual desire form the largest part. For example, Patricia Pulham suggests that the novel displays "a negotiation of homosexual identity within a liminal supernatural space", while Richard Dellamora identifies Wilde's novel as part of a "literature of masculine crisis", and Linda Dowling notes the suggestive weight of Dorian's given name.⁶²⁷ Meanwhile, Craft suggests that the recursive nature of Wilde's writings is an important "discursive strategy" because "repetition was fundamental to the urgent work of implanting transvalued deviations within the

⁶²⁴ In Pater's theory, according to Eastham, there is a "constitutive role" for "the autonomous art object" "in the process of aesthetic self-cultivation", with the "primary drive of many of Pater's artistic personalities appear[ing] to be a kind of self-undoing in which they come to mimic the object of art precisely for its Kantian qualities of autonomy and detachment" (p.43).

⁶²⁵ p.37

⁶²⁶ Sexual jealousy is not my focus, but Rosemary Lloyd has conducted an interesting analysis of the action of sexual jealousy in *Closer and Closer Apart: Jealousy in Literature* (Ithaca: Columbia University Press, 1995). She labels as envy what I call avaricious jealousy.

⁶²⁷ *Transitional Object*, p.137; *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) (p.122).

late-Victorian imaginary”, of producing a body of work that recognised homosexual desire, if only obliquely.⁶²⁸

The novel’s elements of sexual jealousy spring particularly from Basil’s defensive jealousy towards Dorian, as in his explanation that when he “like[s] people immensely” he withholds information about them from others.⁶²⁹ Peeved at hearing that Harry knows of Dorian already, Basil clarifies bluntly: “I don’t want you to meet him”.⁶³⁰ When circumstance forces him to introduce them, he begs Henry not to “take away from [him] the one person that makes life absolutely lovely” and “gives to [his] art whatever wonder or charm it possesses”. Basil here puts his “trust” in Henry, but Henry dismisses Basil’s request as “nonsense” and promptly seeks to exert his influence over Dorian.⁶³¹ While Lord Henry is usually read as an arch ironist,⁶³² in part because of his rejection of Basil’s sincerity here and elsewhere, his refusal to comply with Basil’s wishes hints at his own avaricious jealousy, his wish to acquire Dorian from Basil, as a friend, a lover, or an attractive object to admire.⁶³³ Sheldon Liebman, in his character study of Lord Henry, highlights that Henry chooses to influence Dorian—to make him “one of *Henry’s* multiple selves”—because Henry’s “already pained and wounded self[f] cannot live” the sort of life he commends to Dorian, suggesting that Henry’s avaricious jealousy also extends to Dorian’s possessions: a completeness, free of wounds, and a youthful innocence unaware of pain.⁶³⁴

⁶²⁸ ‘Come See About Me’, p.119

⁶²⁹ *Uncensored*, p.60

⁶³⁰ p.62, p.69 (Basil shows a “slight frown” that Henry interprets as “angry” when he recalls Dorian’s friendship with his aunt), p.70

⁶³¹ p.70

⁶³² An example of this is how Lord Henry articulates his appreciation of the art-object. At first, Lord Henry simply asserts to Basil that the painting is his “best work ... the best thing you have ever done” (p.58). The narrator then repeats this assessment: “It was certainly a wonderful work of art, and a wonderful likeness as well” (p.81). The two sets of repetitions, of “best” and “wonderful”, articulate an aesthetic judgment that seems *pro forma*, shallow in its emotional depth. However, I would argue that this reflects the facade of indifference that Lord Henry has cultivated, and his actions and later speeches undermine this view of him as an ironist.

⁶³³ *Uncensored* also includes a lengthy speech by Henry to Dorian at almost the end of the novel, expressing his envy of Dorian’s “secret” that has meant he has not changed, and his desire “to get back [his] youth” (p.211). He declares here, as though Wilde has anticipated our question about whether he is being ironic, “I am amazed sometimes at my own sincerity”, and goes on to say, “I wish I could change places with you, Dorian” (p.212).

⁶³⁴ ‘Character Design in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”’, *Studies in the Novel*, 31.3 (1999), 296-316 (p.302, original emphasis)

When asked by Basil to leave, Lord Henry makes no argument for himself but forces Basil to concede by appearing to devolve the decision to Dorian. Henry shows that he is deeply aware of how jealousy functions, exacerbating Basil's while also triggering a jealous response in Dorian, who wishes to keep his amusing new acquaintance.⁶³⁵ Although after this moment of tension Basil seems momentarily absorbed by his work, at the end of the scene we see that what he has feared has come to pass, and Henry has "take[n] away" Dorian, metaphorically and literally: Dorian rejects Basil "beg[ging]" him to stay and chooses to go to the theatre with Henry instead.⁶³⁶ Although Basil reiterates to Henry his "trust" in him not to steal or change Dorian, it is already done, revealed in Basil's "look of pain" after the other two men leave.⁶³⁷ This new ordering of their relationships is subsequently reflected in small touches, such as their travel arrangements when going to see Sybil Vane perform: Henry and Dorian travel in Henry's brougham, while Basil must follow alone in a cab.⁶³⁸

Dorian's first encounter with the art-object thus lies between Basil's plea to Henry for restraint and his plea to Dorian for faithfulness, and is inevitably informed by the *Stimmung* of sexual jealousy and betrayal.⁶³⁹ Lord Henry summons Dorian to look at the completed picture: "Mr Gray, come and look at yourself".⁶⁴⁰ Dorian's identity is wholly aligned with the external appearance accessible to observers, and he is invited to join them in an out-of-body experience of self-objectification resulting in the same pleasurable

⁶³⁵ Basil appears to concede in good humour, with a "laugh" (*Uncensored*, p.73). As one of Henry's closest friends, we can imagine that this is not the first time he has been provoked in such a way.

⁶³⁶ p.86

⁶³⁷ p.87

⁶³⁸ p.109

⁶³⁹ That the art-object is completed during this scene has not gone unremarked by critics, and that process is collaborative. While Henry provokes Dorian with various semi-serious theories, Basil looks on, not oblivious, but seeing only the surface, "the most wonderful expression" that Dorian wears as Henry speaks (p.76). Craft thus calls the painting the "material formalization, the visual precipitate" of the scene's "complex erotic influence, the circulation of audiovisual flows" ('Come See About Me', p.123). This collaboration does not, I think, undermine my specific focus on jealousy, as in that moment Basil is so distracted by his art-object, which is in his total possession and under his total mastery, that he cannot conceive of feeling pre-emptively jealous for Dorian's future affections.

⁶⁴⁰ *Uncensored*, p.81

homoeroticism as Basil and Henry feel in observing him.⁶⁴¹ James Raeside notes that “to look at a picture or into a mirror”—often done in conjunction by Dorian—“is not just to see yourself but to see another who is also yourself”, “to divide yourself from yourself”.⁶⁴² In the context of jealousy, encountering the self as not-self allows one to become, as Dorian does, jealous of what one already possesses, and avaricious and defensive jealousy become synchronised.

In his analysis of ‘The Portrait of Mr W.H.’, Richard Halpern builds on Slavoj Žižek’s contrast between “imaginary identification”, “identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves”, and “symbolic identification”, “identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, *from where* we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love”.⁶⁴³ Following this thinking, we might see Dorian’s motivation for making his wish that the portrait age on his behalf as a desire to continue to appear to observers as he does in that moment. While Dorian experiences an imaginary identification with the painting, reflected in the pleasure he feels at looking at it, he also effects a symbolic identification with Henry and Basil, the observing subject positions from which he appears worthy of love. As Craft phrases it, “Wilde composes Dorian’s-becoming-Dorian as Dorian’s-coming-to-desire-Dorian’s-own-desirability”.⁶⁴⁴

Pangs of jealousy and aesthetic suffering

Thus, in this scene, Dorian’s pleasure at the sight of the art-object combines with the *Stimmung* of jealousy to dictate his emotional response of defensive jealousy towards his own appearance. The possibility of his jealousy being frustrated and his beauty escaping him proves painful for him. His fear that “the life that was to make his soul would mar his body” suggests a concern

⁶⁴¹ Craft notes that, “oscillating uncertainly between similarity (‘like that’) and identity (‘the real Dorian’), the ‘original of the portrait’ is seduced into specular identification with an erotically charged image of himself” (‘Come See About Me’, p.121).

⁶⁴² ‘The Spirit is Willing’, p.7

⁶⁴³ *Shakespeare’s Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp.105-6, original emphasis, citing Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso Books, 1989)

⁶⁴⁴ ‘Come See About Me’, p.122

with the body that trumps his desire to live an aesthetic life for its own sake,⁶⁴⁵ reflecting what Ellis Hanson calls Wilde's "aesthetic innovation" of "exquisite pain".⁶⁴⁶ Although Dorian, at this moment, might not describe his suffering in aesthetic terms, Wilde's description illustrates the connection between the pain of jealousy and an aesthetic suffering that will come to characterise Dorian's course through the novel.

Elana Gomel highlights that, despite "critical consensus that in the process of exchange with the portrait Dorian gives up his 'soul'", in fact "it is the body that Dorian relinquishes when he becomes his own painting, while the portrait itself assumes the burden of his corporeality". As a function of the anxieties about form and identity that pervaded discourse network 1890, "the soul, or the psyche, became splintered and mobile", and the aesthete or decadent became able to conceive of various personalities within the self, as Lord Henry advocates. However, as a result of that mobile personality, "the body acquired an uncanny and stubborn agency".⁶⁴⁷ Having yielded up his body to the art-object's control, the art-object renders it fixed and unchanging throughout the rest of the novel: it becomes uncanny for Dorian's friends and associates to encounter, and stubborn in its hold over Dorian's behaviour. It should be no surprise to us, then, that the pain Dorian feels is the pain of being slashed, not stabbed. It is a "sharp pang" "like a knife *across* him", not through or into his body.⁶⁴⁸ The pain that a human body might feel is absent, and instead Dorian feels as though he were a sentient painted canvas. This is the first instance of Dorian's feelings and experience being delimited by the art-object and its technical standards; his metaphorical wounding is defined by the art-object's form, and not his own.

Dorian's "sad[ness]" leads, as sadness often does, to anger and recriminations, which in turn precipitate a threat to the picture identical to that which Dorian has just felt. Dorian takes Basil "object[ing] very strongly" to Dorian's proposal that the art-object age as an expression of concern about the

⁶⁴⁵ *Uncensored*, p.81

⁶⁴⁶ 'Wilde's Exquisite Pain', in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp.101-25 (p.104)

⁶⁴⁷ 'Oscar Wilde, "The Picture of Dorian Gray," and the (Un)death of the Author', *Narrative*, 12.1 (2004), 74-92 (p.82)

⁶⁴⁸ *Uncensored*, p.81, emphasis mine

beauty of his painting, rather than the humanity of his friend, and he criticises Basil, foreshadowing his own obsession with art-objects to the exclusion of all others: “You like your art better than your friends. I am no more to you than a green bronze figure. Hardly as much, I dare say”. Dorian suggests that Basil will always “like” his sculptures, but will only “like [him] ... Till [he] ha[s his] first wrinkle”, comparing Basil’s friendship with Dorian to his feelings towards three sculptures: a “green bronze figure”, “your ivory Hermes”, and “your silver Faun”.⁶⁴⁹ Although beginning with a generic statue and a generalised comparison between life and art, Dorian quickly narrows in on specific sculptures that Basil owns, drawing a comparison between Dorian’s life and individual art-objects that are under Basil’s ownership or control.⁶⁵⁰ Dorian connects himself with sculpture, rather than painting, as though unconsciously aware of what he is about to become: a fixed and immutable representation of himself, the living embodiment of his observer effect of an unageing self that always bears the same ‘past’ appearance. Although Basil cannot perceive this comparison as like-for-like, as a knowing reader may, he does recognise it as a jealous response, and Dorian confirms that he is “jealous of everything whose beauty does not die”, and of the advantage that the portrait has over him: “Why should it keep what I must lose?”.⁶⁵¹ This might appear to be avaricious jealousy, but his anger also flows from a defensive jealousy that is, Dorian fears, to be thwarted by time. As Sarah Kofman phrases it, “the picture strikes him a sudden and violent blow” because “its flattering likeness to himself” “is merely the sign that it has robbed, stolen, devoured his essence”.⁶⁵²

Dorian’s anger and jealousy infects Basil, who begins to “hate” his “finest piece of work”, a response that we can read as an extension of his earlier defensive sexual jealousy. Although Basil suggests that he is doing the right

⁶⁴⁹ p.82

⁶⁵⁰ The reference to the ivory Hermes is linked by Frankel to the Hermes of Praxiteles, of which Wilde kept a plaster cast in his Tite Street study (*Annotated*, p.103). He notes Wilde’s claim, according to Robbie Ross, to have been present at the Hermes’ unearthing at Olympia, extending perhaps Wilde’s sense of ‘ownership’ of the art-object (p.104). The statues may therefore be either Basil’s personal possessions, or art-objects with which he feels a closely possessive aesthetic relationship.

⁶⁵¹ *Uncensored*, p.83

⁶⁵² ‘The Imposture of Beauty: The Uncanniness of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, trans. by Cornell University, in *Enigmas: essays on Sarah Kofman*, ed. by Penelope Deutscher and Kelly Oliver (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp.25-48 (p.30)

thing for all of them when he attempts to destroy the art-object—that he “will not let it come across our three lives and mar them”—it is clear that his motivation is to reverse the entire scene and return to the relationship that he enjoyed with Dorian before Dorian met Henry and encountered the art-object.⁶⁵³ However, Dorian intervenes, dashing across the room and hurling the palette knife from Basil’s grip, declaring that to destroy the art-object would be “murder” as the picture is “a part of [him]self”, a conceit with which Basil wryly plays along: “as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home”.⁶⁵⁴

It is often supposed that Lord Henry’s words during this scene—his argument for a New Hedonism, his warning that “Time is jealous of you, and wars against your lilies and your roses”, and his advice to Dorian that “with [his] personality there is nothing [he] could not do”, as “the world belongs to [him] for a season”, a temporary possession that will defy any defensive jealousy—establish Dorian’s jealous obsession with the art-object and its beauty, which dictates his future behaviour.⁶⁵⁵ Although Henry’s advice “stirred” “fresh impulses” in Dorian, I argue that it is the art-object’s technical standards, such as the extent to which it reproduces mimetically the colour of his eyes, lips and hair, and the “grace of his figure”, that controls Dorian’s sensations and impulses.⁶⁵⁶ Eleni Ikoniadou, in discussing how we talk about media, notes that “the validity of man” is always a starting assumption: we assume that there exists “an intact self” with “the authority” to interrogate media, “having taken its own existence as a given”.⁶⁵⁷ Wilde’s novel challenges this, in the sense that Dorian has no awareness of his “own existence” aesthetically and phenomenologically, as it affects others, before his encounter with the art-object. Dorian cannot grasp or desire his beauty until he has acquired his picture as a reference point. Without it, Lord Henry’s words would have come to naught.

⁶⁵³ *Uncensored*, p.83. That Basil includes Lord Henry in his statement when Henry has expressed nothing beyond aesthetic admiration for the art-object indicates the sexual jealousy that Basil knows affects them both.

⁶⁵⁴ p.85

⁶⁵⁵ pp.78-9

⁶⁵⁶ p.75, p.81

⁶⁵⁷ ‘Primer: The Media Questions’, in *Media After Kittler*, ed. by Eleni Ikoniadou and Scott Wilson (London: Rowman, 2015), pp.1-14 (p.1)

The picture thus occupies a position of “authority” as the object whose “own existence” is taken as a given in the very title of the novel.⁶⁵⁸ Dorian’s moment of “becoming-Dorian” entails both his jealous desire for desirability and his recognition of himself as a “blank canvas awaiting the artist’s touch”,⁶⁵⁹ “an inscription surface” that might be developed into an opaque and obscure art-object.⁶⁶⁰ In his encounter with the art-object a few weeks later, and as he absorbs the knowledge of his wish’s fulfilment, Dorian must “try to gather up the scarlet threads of life, and to weave them into a pattern”; he must create that which did not exist from the raw material to which the art-object exposes him.⁶⁶¹

Dorian’s brief relationship with Sybil Vane is one of his few life experiences that the novel treats in detail, as it precedes the art-object’s second revelation to him, of its own enduring priority. While he was the passive recipient of Basil and Henry’s jealousy, Dorian actively pursues Sybil and seeks to “make Romeo jealous” and “the dead lovers of the world” “sad” through their relationship.⁶⁶² Perhaps having learnt his behaviour from Basil, Dorian finds his own “blank canvas” upon which to work: an actress who is all Shakespeare’s heroines but never herself until her encounter with Dorian awakens her sense of love beyond art. That descent into the real world horrifies Dorian because it destroys her capacity to act, and so frustrates his opportunity to compete with lovers in art. It is the loss of this opportunity to “make Romeo jealous” with his love that causes Dorian to cast Sybil aside as a failed experiment in the social sphere, and it is the picture’s understanding of those motivations, before Dorian can grasp them himself, that shocks him when he encounters the art-object later that night.

⁶⁵⁸ Compare and contrast, for example, *Dorian Gray* with ‘The Portrait of Mr W.H.’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (July 1889), 1-21. In the latter, the portrait—and the romantic narrative constructed around it by Wilde’s characters—is all there is of W.H. The relationships formed between the characters via the fake portrait are what is important. In the former, the character of Dorian Gray is preceded by his picture, and within Wilde’s narrative framework it is the relationship of the human Dorian to the picture that is at issue. For further critical discussion of Dorian’s identity formation in this scene, see Craft, ‘Come See About Me’, pp.113-4; Rebecka Klette, *Fin de la réalité: Artificial milieus and hyperreality in Huysmans’ A Rebours and Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Victorian*, 3.3 (2015), 1-14 (p.2); Tamás, ‘Double Vision’, p.71; and McCormack, ‘Wilde’s Fiction(s)’, pp.112-3.

⁶⁵⁹ Craft, ‘Come See About Me’, pp.114

⁶⁶⁰ Gill Partington, ‘Friedrich Kittler’s “Aufschreibesystem”’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 33.1 (2006), 53-67 (p.62)

⁶⁶¹ *Uncensored*, p.126

⁶⁶² p.98

The art-object now occupies his library, and it is—as Walter Sickert suggested of all good portraits—“telling its story of sympathy and comprehension”, although it does not quite take “years of silent appeal” for this to be effected.⁶⁶³ Dorian’s portrait operates upon him, and others, rather like the portraits in Lee’s stories, which lurk on the margins of living spaces and work upon subjects through their pervasive release of *Stimmung*, as well as in moments of encounter. Just as Basil felt an “intolerable fascination” when the portrait was in his “presence”,⁶⁶⁴ Dorian’s portrait has a magnetic appeal for its owner: he has spent “morning after morning ... sat before the portrait wondering at its beauty”, and even “once, in boyish mockery of Narcissus, he had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips”.⁶⁶⁵ Dorian has revelled in encounters with the art-object that focus entirely on the past meaning of his beauty, which he then believes it to convey. It is not in such a moment of encounter that the portrait’s change strikes Dorian, then, but in a moment of mechanical, careless observation, similar to Spiridion’s encounter of the grand portrait of Medea da Carpi in *Hauntings*: “his eye fell upon the portrait”, and its apparent change makes him “curious”.⁶⁶⁶

When Dorian inspects the art-object, he identifies “the lines of cruelty round the mouth” “as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing”.⁶⁶⁷ That the portrait might act as a “mirror” and show changing versions of him, and that his avaricious jealousy might perhaps have led him to do a dreadful thing in his dealings with Sybil, prompts Dorian to reach for an actual mirror that is conveniently near-at-hand, what Craft calls “a prosthesis”, in order to compare his “two reflections”.⁶⁶⁸ Craft’s choice of

⁶⁶³ In his review of the 1897 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, published in *The Speaker* on 15 May, Sickert wrote: “the test of a portrait is not whether it attracts attention on the walls of an exhibition, but how far it succeeds, in the house where it is meant to live, in telling its story of sympathy and comprehension through years of silent appeal” (*Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Anna Gruetzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.168. Frankel quotes this remark without gloss, attaching it to Dorian’s experience in Basil’s studio that “the sense of his own beauty” was “a revelation” newly “felt” (*Annotated*, p.102). Yet, it strikes me that Sickert’s remark has more to say to this later encounter than the first.

⁶⁶⁴ *Uncensored*, p.145

⁶⁶⁵ p.135

⁶⁶⁶ p.120. See ‘Amour Dure: Passages from the from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka’, in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, 2nd edition (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1906), pp.3-58 (p.31-2).

⁶⁶⁷ *Uncensored*, p.120

⁶⁶⁸ ‘Come See About Me’, p.109

vocabulary reflects the fact that the novel again conflates that which shows the body and the body itself, reinforcing our sense that Dorian has given up his body with his “mad wish”.⁶⁶⁹ The sight of the body is a missing part thereof. This begins a pattern of encountering the changing art-object that persists throughout the rest of the novel. Dorian uses the mirror again and again to “counterpose images of his enduring beauty against those of his emerging ugliness”.⁶⁷⁰ The mirror suggests to Dorian that his beauty may in fact be that of an opaque art-object, while the art-object lays bare that which lies beneath.

As part of a cultural technique of encounter that involves the body performing certain actions in engagement with the art-object, Dorian’s encounters are more complex than one simply between an observer and the art-object. The cultural technique of encounter is bifurcated; Dorian consecutively (given the impossibility of simultaneity) encounters both the picture and his own body as art-objects, with past and future meanings entirely separated. When he encounters the art-object, he turns to himself in the mirror for past meanings, bypassing recursion, and so also the observer effect, as he ceases to be able to imagine the future meanings of his life and can only wait for the art-object to communicate them to him. The first bifurcated encounter prompts Dorian to reflect both on his appearance and his behaviour through the data that the art-object transmits. He “remember[s]” his “callousness” and asks himself “why had he been made like that?”.⁶⁷¹ Although Dorian has yet to settle on a final explanation for the portrait’s changeability—like some of Lee’s characters, he struggles to maintain a sceptical distance from the art-object and tries several times to identify a psychological cause for what he observes⁶⁷²—

⁶⁶⁹ *Uncensored*, p.120

⁶⁷⁰ Craft, ‘Come See About Me’, p.109. Frankel juxtaposes this sentence with other supernatural pictures in English-language fiction, from Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), through to *fin-de-siècle* novels like Elizabeth Lysaght’s *The Veiled Picture: Or a Wizard’s Legacy* (1889). He suggests, as Powell and others have done, that “Wilde’s novel can thus be viewed as culminating a literary tradition” of the magic portrait (*Annotated*, p.149).

⁶⁷¹ *Uncensored*, p.121

⁶⁷² Dorian discards the possibility of the change being a “mere fancy” (p.120), only to wonder again whether it is “an illusion wrought on the troubled senses”, that “there had fallen upon his brain that tiny scarlet speck that makes men mad” (p.121). Many critics follow this line of thinking and offer psychological or psychoanalytic readings of the novel, which Tamás has critiqued as “plodding unfoldings of obvious psychoanalytical allegories” (‘Double Vision’, p.61). Such interpretations address, for example, the novel in the light of the hinted-at abuse of Dorian by his grandfather (Esther Rashkin, ‘Art as Symptom: A Portrait of Child Abuse in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”’, *Modern Philology*, 95.1 (1997), 68-80), or the psychological theories of the

he understands his callousness not as a transient action reflected in the portrait, but as a structural defect in himself. The art-object and the change in his expression that it has apparently concretised dictate Dorian's understanding of himself; again, he is beholden to the art-object's technical standards. What might have been a fleeting expression on Dorian's face is fixed in time by the art-object's painted surface, and he understands it to be an intrinsic part of his constitution. The portrait's dominance hints at its power to "determine" Dorian's situation, and his interpretations thereof.

Although Dorian claims to feel "infinite regret" over his treatment of Sybil, it is outweighed by his "infinite pity" for the art-object's changing appearance. The hyperbolic description of both feelings as "infinite" illustrates Dorian's actual detachment from them. Despite his supposed regret, he shrugs Sybil off again—"Why should he trouble about Sybil Vane? She was nothing to him now"—and attends instead to the picture in an attempt to define his relationship to it. Dorian notes that "it held the secret of his life, and told his story" and "had taught him to love his own beauty", and he wonders: "Would it teach him to loathe his own soul?".⁶⁷³ His concern about his sadistic treatment of Sybil is rapidly converted into curiosity about whether and how that behaviour might result in masochistic, "exquisite" pain for himself.

Data storage and transmission: the body versus the art-object

While we as readers can detect how the art-object dictates to Dorian his understanding of himself, Dorian believes himself, at this stage, to be a benevolent dictator over the art-object. Inspired by his "pity", he resolves that, because "a stain would fleck and wreck [the portrait's] fairness" whenever he "sin[s]", he will commit to living a pure life, allowing the art-object to be "to him the visible emblem of conscience".⁶⁷⁴ Dorian expresses here an optimistic commitment to working to eradicate "noise" from his life, in the light of the art-object's concretising of that noise for all to see. He does not wish to be like the

time (Heather Seagroatt, 'Hard Science, Soft Psychology, and Amorphous Art in The Picture of Dorian Gray', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 38.4 (1998), 741-59).

⁶⁷³ *Uncensored*, pp.121-2

⁶⁷⁴ p.121

“noblest daughter” who will “suddenly look like an ex-con” because the photograph’s data storage capacities make no distinction between noise and information,⁶⁷⁵ but despite Basil’s best intentions in producing the beautiful portrait, the art-object now threatens of its own accord to represent both noise and information indiscriminately. This indiscriminate nature of its data storage and transmission is reflected in Dorian’s description of the art-object, as he struggles to reconcile its storage of data he would wish to keep hidden—“the secret of his life”—and its transmission of those data, “[t]elling] his story” and “teach[ing]” him about himself. Dorian’s struggle to reconcile the art-object’s data storage and data transmission continues throughout the novel: at times he believes that the art-object would be meaningless to an uninitiated observer, but more often than not he is terrified of the prospect that it will prove all too revealing to a casual observer.⁶⁷⁶ Dorian’s avaricious jealousy regarding the art-object’s lasting beauty dissipates, and he now feels defensive jealousy over the story that its changing appearance might tell to those who encounter it.

With data transmission now a key concern for Dorian, it is little surprise that he hides the art-object behind a screen and can only force himself to confront it again owing to his fear of it telling its secret to another, such as Basil. What follows the description of this unveiling in the novel is not a fresh encounter, but one remembered by Dorian, the description of his emotional response prefaced by: “As he often remembered afterwards”.⁶⁷⁷ That encounter closely echoes his experience of the previous night, and it is only after Lord Henry’s visit to deliver the news of Sybil’s suicide that Dorian realises the significance of the portrait’s change: “it was conscious of the events of life as they occurred”.⁶⁷⁸ The art-object, Dorian realises, processes—and, to his mind, comprehends—the data of his life and actions in real time, ahead even of his own appreciation of them. The ‘truth’ of his experiences is revealed only in the subsequent moment of encounter with the art-object that receives, stores, and

⁶⁷⁵ *Optical Media*, trans. by Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p.144

⁶⁷⁶ He suggests that to see the portrait “would tell them nothing”, as “he would laugh at anyone who tried to taunt him”, and he questions: “even if he told them [the truth], would they believe it?” And yet, these efforts to convince himself fail. Only one paragraph later, we learn that he believes that, “if it were stolen”, “surely the world would know his secret then”, reflecting paranoidly, “perhaps the world already suspected it” (*Uncensored*, p.172).

⁶⁷⁷ p.125

⁶⁷⁸ p.134

transmits that information. The portrait is a contemporaneous record of Dorian's thoughts, feelings and actions, and their impact on the world around him; the art-object conducts the hermeneutic action that ought to take place during Dorian's introspection before the mirror. This releases Dorian to wish that he would one day "see the change taking place before his very eyes", witness the data processing and storage by the art-object in real-time.⁶⁷⁹ Although he "shudder[s]" with horror at this thought, his "new and terrible desire" is an undeniable "infinite curiosity" that becomes the guiding force for the rest of Dorian's life.⁶⁸⁰ The art-object begins to dictate Dorian's actions, as well as his experiences. Having received the art-object's commands, Dorian becomes beholden to it and its technical standards.

The series of encounters between Dorian and the art-object after Sybil's death demonstrate how the art-object manipulates Dorian's values along a sliding scale. From his "infinite regret" for his treatment of Sybil, Dorian moves smoothly to "infinite pity" for the art-object that will grow ugly, and then to "infinite curiosity" about its changes. He becomes jealously interested not in sexual relationships, or the art-object's beauty, but in its power as a medium to process, store and transmit data. A similar shift takes place in how he expresses the importance of the portrait's "bear[ing] the burden of his shame": "that was all".⁶⁸¹ In contrast, he declares that his own advantage over the art-object, the "real pleasure" in watching its changes whilst he remains "safe" from that burden, "like the Gods of the Greeks ... strong, and fleet, and joyous", "was everything".⁶⁸² From the finalising "all" to the expansive "everything", Dorian later comes to feel that "ke[eping] his youth—that was enough".⁶⁸³ Dorian seeks to control the impact of the art-object on his life, minimising the horror of its changes and over-estimating his detachment in encountering it, before

⁶⁷⁹ This aspiration is never—as far as we know—fulfilled, not even when Dorian murders Basil in the presence of the art-object; he cannot, in that moment, face observing the art-object, which always thus precedes him.

⁶⁸⁰ p.135

⁶⁸¹ p.135

⁶⁸² p.136. As well as reinforcing the link between Dorian and Narcissus, this reference to the Greek Gods also resonates with *Gods in Exile: an essay by Heinrich Heine* (Pasadena: Castle Press, 1962). There is a suggestion that Dorian, in his grandiosity, and with his magical portrait, might be a demigod, a move that, as in Lee's 'Dionea' (in *Hauntings*, pp.61-103), conflates religion and aestheticism. The power, however, as Dorian eventually learns, is all the art-object's.

⁶⁸³ *Uncensored*, p.153

accepting the barest positive outcome that it offers him. These transitions reflect the art-object's control as it limits both Dorian's desires and his opportunities.

Later in the novel, Basil seeks to provide a corrective to the art-object's power, but Dorian's defensive jealousy over its recording of the story of his life prevents him from heeding Basil's lesson. When Basil asks to see the portrait, Dorian almost panics, feeling again "a strange sense of terror" at the idea of his portrait transmitting its data to someone else.⁶⁸⁴ Tricked by Dorian into revealing his own "passion" instead, however, Basil comments upon the reception of art, arguing that "it is a mistake to think that the passion one feels in creation is ever really shown in the work one creates" because "art is more abstract than we fancy" and "conceals the artist far more completely than it ever reveals him".⁶⁸⁵ Basil, thinking like a Paterian ironic aesthete, sees opacity as a quality of (good) art, but Dorian cannot reconcile that argument with his jealous encounters with the changing art-object behind the screen. Rather, Basil's argument makes the art-object all the more singular, and so all the more attractive to Dorian's jealous sensibilities, as it appears to be a transparent representation of his actions and "passions" that will be known otherwise only in rumours. The opacity and obscurity that Basil might associate with an art-object have instead been transferred to Dorian.

Tamás has noted with some surprise that "ironically it is Basil, the artist, who proves to be the phenomenologically most naïve character, believing in the unproblematic continuity between interior and exterior".⁶⁸⁶ While Dorian appears to frustrate that equation, the art-object that Wilde's novel presents actually demands that we take this position, equating moral behaviour with physical beauty, as this is the very data the art-object transmits. The belief in the transparency of artistic representation is reflected in Dorian's encounters with a range of portraits of his ancestors. Fascinated with heredity, he thinks of man as "a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead". While at his country home, Dorian "loved to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery", a place that itself appears "tainted" and sick, to "look at the

⁶⁸⁴ p.142, p.125

⁶⁸⁵ p.145

⁶⁸⁶ 'Double Vision', p.68

various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins”.⁶⁸⁷ In each encounter with one of these art-objects, Dorian detects sins and passions that resemble his own. The meaning of the portrait gallery is the very opposite of the description of the portraits of Des Esseintes’ forebears in *À rebours*, which depict a clear tendency to weakness over the course of time from “muscular warriors and grim-looking mercenaries” to family members with “a debilitated constitution” and men who had “grown progressively more effeminate”.⁶⁸⁸ Dorian’s ancestors, however, seem to grow in the strength of their sinfulness, contributing to his own through “an inheritance of sin and shame”. He speculates that “some dim sense” of the “ruined grace” of his ancestor Philip Herbert had led him to utter his prayer in Basil’s studio, and wonders whether it was now Herbert’s “life that he sometimes led”.⁶⁸⁹ Each portrait suggests that the data it stores about physical appearance encapsulate all of the meaningful points regarding an individual’s personality.

Gomel suggests that for Wilde, and other aesthetes in discourse network 1890, “the process of artistic creation takes the form of cultivating an ideal self or ‘personality’ that is then projected into the work of art”.⁶⁹⁰ However, Dorian constructs an *anti*-ideal, investigating the corruption that is projected into his portrait. Lawrence Danson notes how the focus on personality that Wilde shares with Pater “challenges the earnest Victorian ideal of the singular and self-contained individual”, reflecting the “contradiction” between the “self-making and an always made self, a creative and a created personality”.⁶⁹¹ Dorian’s circumstances allow us to tease out this apparent contradiction. Dorian’s picture reflects his “created personality”, his “always made self” because the art-object

⁶⁸⁷ *Uncensored*, p.174

⁶⁸⁸ *Against Nature*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.3. For more on the relationship between *Dorian Gray* and *À rebours*, see Shelton Waldrep, ‘The Aesthetic Realism of Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 29.1 (1996), 103-113; and C. Michael Shea, ‘Fallen Nature and Infinite Desire: A Study of Love, Artifice, and Transcendence in Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À rebours* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, *Logos*, 17.1 (2014), 115-139.

⁶⁸⁹ *Uncensored*, p.174. He wonders similarly whether his actions are “merely the dreams” that Sir Anthony Sherard “had not dared to realise”, despite passing on to Dorian an “inheritance of sin and shame” (p.174), and whether his poisonous beauty derives from Lady Elizabeth Devereux’s dangerous influence on her lovers (p.175).

⁶⁹⁰ ‘(Un)death of the Author’, p.76

⁶⁹¹ *Wilde’s Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp.17-8

precedes him, even as it records his supposedly “creative” actions of “self-making”.

What of the process of self-making itself, then? For a Wildean aesthete out in the world, self-making might reflect what Pierre Nicole has discussed as the process whereby “each of those who surround us form”, with “the different ways in which our actions are regarded”, one of “an almost infinite variety of portraits”,⁶⁹² just as Dorian experiences wildly differing receptions in society, from the scorn of former friends like Lord Cawdor to the admiration of young aesthetic men who stay at Selby Royal.⁶⁹³ Nicole suggests that, because of this variability of reception, “one must act more or less in this life as if one had a lifelong undertaking to paint one’s portrait”, “add[ing] everyday a few strokes of the brush without blotting out what has already been painted” and forming “little by little a portrait so resembling that we will be able to see at any moment everything which we are”.⁶⁹⁴ Such a metaphor that allows the medium—painting—to dictate a truth about the subject is eminently appropriate for Wilde’s novel, and it describes uncannily the process by which Dorian’s portrait is made, layering each experience’s effects upon those that went before.

Louis Marin therefore notes that “the true portrait” of each individual is “the *figure of an excess* formed by repeated strokes, and not that of a *personal essence* obtained by rubbing out”.⁶⁹⁵ This excess pushes against the “earnest Victorian ideal” of a self-contained individual with a personal essence; at any moment the portrait might be stopped, reflecting the “made self”, and yet in each moment more brushstrokes are added. Dorian’s picture indeed forms such a “site of allegorical excess”.⁶⁹⁶ Eastham has assessed the use by Wilde of Pater’s “Giorgionesque mode of being”, “tied to an accumulative and successive prose style that produces paratactic effects” in order “to orchestrate a series of successive impressions that maintain a relative autonomy”.⁶⁹⁷ For an aesthete such as Dorian, the “repeated strokes” of his actions do not work

⁶⁹² Pierre Nicole, *Essaies de Morale* (Paris, 1725), pp.13-4, translated and cited by Louis Marin in ‘The Figurability of the Visual: The Veronica or the Question of the Portrait at Port-Royal’, trans. by Marie Maclean, *New Literary History*, 22.2 (1991), 281-96 (p.285).

⁶⁹³ *Uncensored*, p.204, pp.182-3

⁶⁹⁴ *Essaies*, p.84, translated and cited in Marin, ‘Figurability of the Visual’, pp.286-7

⁶⁹⁵ ‘Figurability of the Visual’, p.286, original emphasis

⁶⁹⁶ Tamás, ‘Double Vision’, p.61

⁶⁹⁷ *Aesthetic Afterlives*, p.156

together to create a cohesive identity as a “singular and self-contained individual”. Rather, his self-making operates via the Giorgionesque mode without hierarchy or set end goal.⁶⁹⁸ Tamás suggests that Basil, through the initial portrait, “created Dorian as *an image*”, “thereby depriving him of an interiority which then could be projected phenomenally into an external image or appearance”.⁶⁹⁹ As we have noted, the “giving a self” to a character through ekphrastic prosopopoeia is not an experience of our reading the novel, but Dorian’s experience of being in the novel, encountering the art-object as an observer.

Ironically, in attempting to exert control over the art-object, that external image of himself, Dorian loses the capacity to project his own personality into the world. Rather, his initial moment of self-realisation before the picture in Basil’s studio is “the awakening of an image”, and thereafter, “masquerading as a human being, the image-machine sets out into the world, wreaking havoc wherever it goes”, havoc that we learn of only from Basil’s descriptions of the rumours that circulate about Dorian and the novel’s partial ekphrases of the picture.⁷⁰⁰ Tamás here develops an understanding of machines that resembles Steven Connor’s conception of “a material device that allows the iterable and automatic performance of a specific task in the stead of some performer”.⁷⁰¹ It is this machine nature, the automatic and iterated performance of Dorian-ness, controlled and set in motion by the art-object, that prevents Dorian from using his “wonderful influence ... for good”, as Basil urges him.⁷⁰²

Throughout the novel, the art-object “links into a meaningful sequence” the “repeated strokes” of Dorian’s actions, the “otherwise random sins” that he

⁶⁹⁸ Julia Kent, in her analysis of *Dorian Gray* and its relationship to English and French Decadence, has identified around the point of Dorian learning of Sybil’s suicide a “sudden shift from pleasurable to self-disciplined consumption” (‘Oscar Wilde’s “False Notes”: *Dorian Gray* and English Realism’, <<https://www.erudit.org/revue/ravon/2007/v/n48/017437ar.html>> [accessed 17 March 2017], para.14). The idea of “self-disciplined consumption” might seem to run counter to the view of Dorian as behaving according to a Giorgionesque mode. However, the two are not necessarily incompatible. In his actions, Dorian has a goal: to effect change in the art-object. He acts not purely out of impulse, in order to seek pleasurable sensations, but with this goal always in mind.

⁶⁹⁹ ‘Double Vision’, p.66, original emphasis

⁷⁰⁰ *ibid*, p.67

⁷⁰¹ Steven Connor, ‘How to Do Things With Writing Machines’, *StevenConnor.com* <stevenconnor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/writingmachines.pdf> [accessed 17 March 2017], p.9

⁷⁰² *Uncensored*, p.183

commits while living his life in the Giorgionesque mode.⁷⁰³ The final four chapters of the novel reveal Dorian's interest, not in his experiences, but in the "story" that the art-object constructs from that data and reveals to him alone. At times, Dorian seeks to avoid the art-object, to loosen its hold on his life, and these efforts sometimes succeed: he "forget[s] the hideous painted thing", regaining "his passionate pleasure in mere existence". However, these "modes by which he could escape" follow the model of Dorian's obsession with his picture's changes, the cultural technique of jealous encounter. Just as he obsessively effects small changes to the art-object, he becomes an avid collector of a variety of *objets d'art* that are successful as a "means of forgetfulness" only "for a season".⁷⁰⁴ Tactile interactions perform an important function in these escapist endeavours; Dorian "love[s] beautiful things that one can touch and handle", including "green bronzes" and "carved ivories".⁷⁰⁵ The litany of physical descriptions change the texture of the prose for us as readers; while we are denied a full ekphrastic view of the art-object, we are bombarded with minutiae regarding these secondary art-objects, emphasising the momentary immersion that Dorian experiences through encounters that are both somatic and visual.⁷⁰⁶

As Gomel suggests, "by giving up his material 'thingness'" in his exchange with the art-object, Dorian "becomes unable to experience desire that is generated, frustrated and fulfilled" materially. Rather, he becomes "a discursive formation, impotently craving the intoxication of the real but unable to touch it".⁷⁰⁷ This illuminates the source of Dorian's seemingly boundless, impossible-to-fulfil yearning for materiality, for presence as well as appearance, which he himself has lost. Dorian seeks to hone in on this materiality through the historical decontextualisation of the objects in his collection, denying them

⁷⁰³ Powell, 'Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray', p.160

⁷⁰⁴ *Uncensored*, p.171

⁷⁰⁵ p.140. These objects call to mind the sculptures that Dorian accused Basil of liking more than his friends, an ironic reference to Dorian's earlier naivety.

⁷⁰⁶ Isobel Murray details how these sections of the novel draw on the South Kensington catalogues of *Musical Instruments*, *Precious Stones*, and *Textile Fabrics* ('Explanatory Notes', in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981; repr. 1998), pp.185-98 (pp.191-2).

⁷⁰⁷ '(Un)death of the Author', p.84

“a separate and distinct identity” apart from him, their collector.⁷⁰⁸ Dorian’s obsession with handling those objects suggests that he is both seeking to overwhelm his senses and to reassert his control over meaning-making. While his picture creates meaning from the data of his life, Dorian attempts to create counter-meanings in his collections of beautiful things, which offer partial aesthetic manifestations of his choices and actions in the world, composed as they are through his acts of buying and arranging.

However, the one thing that the picture does not allow is forgetting, either of its existence or of its faultless processing of each and every act of Dorian’s into a minute but unmissable change in its own physical appearance, creating a “story” without any data loss. The *Stimmung* of inescapable noise, of perfect memory, that the portrait generates slowly oppresses Dorian, and the pressure of its presence prompts his irresistible temptation to visit “dreadful places” and do, presumably, dreadful things that will add again to that “story”.⁷⁰⁹ Bruce Bashford suggests that there is an “arresting” “fit” between Gagnier’s notion of insatiability, as set out in her account of the rise of consumer culture at the end of the nineteenth century, and Dorian’s “searches for sensations that would be new and delightful”.⁷¹⁰ This link to consumer culture might lead us to expect that Dorian’s insatiable searching for new sensation is directed by “delight” and experience, but in the novel his drive appears to be for new data that might produce in the art-object new wrinkles, spots or stains. The concern that Dorian expresses during his first encounter with the art-object about the marring of his body—whilst “mak[ing]” his soul—is reflected in the novel’s focus not on Dorian’s actions and experiences, but on his encounters with the art-object to which he has yielded up his body. While he initially fears that “he”—not his body, but “he”; form is all he is—“would become ignoble, hideous, and uncouth” with time, this in fact becomes his primary goal.⁷¹¹ Whereas he once feared that the art-object would “mock [him] some day, mock [him] horribly” by reminding

⁷⁰⁸ Kristin Mahoney, ‘Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption’, *Criticism*, 48.1 (2006), 39-67 (p.39)

⁷⁰⁹ *Uncensored*, p.171

⁷¹⁰ ‘When Critics Disagree: Recent Approaches to Oscar Wilde’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30.2 (2002), 613-25 (p.619), citing Gagnier’s *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Modern Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000)

⁷¹¹ *Uncensored*, p.81

him of his lost beauty, he comes to “mock the misshapen body and the failing limbs”.⁷¹² Although Dorian infrequently feels “a pity” for the image “that was all the more poignant because it was purely selfish”, more often than not his encounters with the art-object result only in “that curiosity about life” that “Lord Henry had first stirred in him”, which “seem[s] to increase with gratification”.⁷¹³ Dorian’s obsessive yearning for more experience, for the subtlest of differences, flows only from his desire to encounter the subtlest of changes in the art-object.

The art-object’s emergence from the “dark margins”

While Dorian seems proud of his apparent victory over the art-object, retaining the permanent beauty that he had originally envied in it, he is increasingly dominated by the image that “determines [his] situation”. As we know, these experiences culminate in Dorian’s deep contemplation of the art-object,⁷¹⁴ but his strong belief in the inevitable—and transparent—outcome of the art-object’s processing of his life’s data also leads him to become obsessed about access to the attic that contains it.

As Tamás suggests, “entities in the novel tend to leak or flow into each other”, with “relationships ... based on adjacency and contiguity” in a way that echoes the influence of place as a holder of past memories in Lee’s tales.⁷¹⁵ Despite his supposed dominance over the art-object, Dorian is defensively jealous of its data transmission. He becomes obsessed with preventing others from coming into contact with it, preventing the “adjacency” that might allow the art-object to “leak” information about his life to others. Dorian comes to “hate” being separated from the painting, and he becomes so anxious about others knowing about the picture’s changing appearance that he dismisses his otherwise trusted valet out of fear that the man might be a “spy” (for whom is never clear).⁷¹⁶ Dorian further succumbs to his fear that “during his absence

⁷¹² p.83, p.159

⁷¹³ p.160

⁷¹⁴ p.171

⁷¹⁵ p.64

⁷¹⁶ *Uncensored*, p.172, p.155. Although there is not space here to explore it in detail, there is an interesting class element about Dorian’s defensive jealousy over his portrait, which focuses in particular on the workmen who move the picture and his valet. See, in particular, Andrew Goldstone’s essay on servant figures (“Servants, Aestheticism, and “The Dominance of Form””,

some one might gain access to the room” and gives up foreign travel in order to maintain his proximity to the art-object and satisfy his defensive jealousy over it. His fear of the world “know[ing] his secret” and his wish jealously to guard the knowledge that he fears is “already suspected” prevail over him.⁷¹⁷

However, the art-object’s greatest deception is persuading Dorian that by controlling access to it he can control his relationship with it and its power over him. Bernhard Siegert suggests, in his essay ‘Media After Media’, that “media ... love to conceal themselves, but that does not mean that they have no agency”. Rather, “their foreclosure allows them to rule and make those who are subject to their rule believe that they are autonomously acting, perceiving and thinking systems”.⁷¹⁸ The art-object’s material substrate and its method of changing are concealed, so that Dorian is left to contemplate the art-object’s surface message without ever grasping its mode of operation, a puzzle that Basil also proves incapable of solving.⁷¹⁹ It is little wonder that Dorian’s various attempts to forget the picture focus so heavily on material items. Gradually, however, the deception begins to fade. Dorian begins to doubt his own agency in producing the “story” that the art-object tells. So captivated is he by the art-object’s data processing and the compelling image that it produces that there is an apparent inexorability in each choice that Dorian makes, which he comes to see: he argues that “the future was inevitable”, and that Basil could never have helped him, even with his “good advice”.⁷²⁰ When Dorian feels that “the time had really come for making his choice”, he dismisses that feeling on the grounds that “life had decided ... for him”.⁷²¹ While Dorian declares “life” to have

ELH, 77.3 (2010), 615-43) and Norman Kelvin’s comparison of how Wilde and Pater employ ‘verbal portraits’, with the word ‘portrait’ rising to prominence in the late 1880s through to the 1920s as a descriptor for types of writing (‘The Painting as Physical Object in a Verbal Portrait: Pater’s “A Prince of Court Painters” and Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”’, in *Victorian Aesthetic Conditions: Pater Across the Arts*, ed. by Elicia Clements and Lesley Higgins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.117-34). Gagnier has assessed the critical reception of *Dorian Gray*, and the treatment of Wilde in the press during his trials, as illustrating a backlash against such an exclusion of the middle classes (*Idylls*, p.11).

⁷¹⁷ *Uncensored*, p.172

⁷¹⁸ in *Media After Kittler*, ed. by Ikonidou and Wilson, pp.79-91 (p.80)

⁷¹⁹ Basil, the painter who might be expected to be an expert on the materiality of his own oil painting, is similarly baffled by the art-object’s materiality; he seeks to rationalise the “impossible” changes in the art-object’s appearance, speculating about “mildew” or “wretched mineral poison” in the paints, without managing to convince himself (*Uncensored*, p.188).

⁷²⁰ p.150, p.99

⁷²¹ p.135

decided, however, we suspect, and he eventually learns, that it is the art-object that has dictated the course of his life.

Siegert warns of the need for critics to look “behind” media’s “masks of humanity, truth, the spirit” in order to “discover ... [the] ‘Klartext’ ... the ‘clear text’ of power relations and the materialities of media”.⁷²² The ‘clear text’ of Dorian’s portrait is its silent and concealed power, which is indeed ultimately located in its materiality. Despite his jealous protection of the art-object, Dorian finally grants Basil an audience with the art-object that he physically created in order to “mock” the painter’s belief that “sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face” and “cannot be concealed”.⁷²³ As in Chapter 2, Basil provokes Dorian’s wilful, “mad” “pride”, and Dorian cannot resist finally unburdening himself in order to shatter Basil’s illusions about his enduring beauty.⁷²⁴ Basil’s encounter with the changed art-object is a short and painful one, which begins with “an exclamation of horror” at “the hideous thing on the canvas leering at him”. Basil experiences a sense of defensive jealousy towards the ‘real’ Dorian’s beautiful appearance, wishing to retain his belief in it and its message of goodness. What finally persuades Basil of the truth—that the art-object reflects transparently all of Dorian’s sins—are the physical characteristics that signal Basil’s own authorship of the work: “his own brush-work” and “his own name, traced in long letters of bright vermilion”.⁷²⁵ These material facts of the art-object’s physical creation as a painting have persisted despite the “masks of [in]humanity, truth, the spirit” that Dorian has laid atop them.

Just as Lord Henry watched apparently dispassionately as Dorian encountered the art-object for the first time, so Dorian appears dispassionate while observing Basil’s final encounter with it, his face bearing “that strange expression” of one “absorbed in a play,” without “real sorrow” or “real joy”, “simply the passion of the spectator”. Yet, this is combined “with perhaps a flicker of triumph in the eyes”.⁷²⁶ Dorian’s “triumph” arises from proving to Basil that he has achieved the impossible: “show[ing Dorian’s] soul”.⁷²⁷ Dorian’s

⁷²² ‘Media After Media’, p.82

⁷²³ *Uncensored*, p.184, p.182

⁷²⁴ p.184

⁷²⁵ p.187

⁷²⁶ p.188

⁷²⁷ p.184

avaricious jealousy is gratified. He has taken that which was Basil's—the pleasure and pride of having created the art-object—and has bested him. Accordingly, when Basil questions the portrait's veracity, Dorian “crie[s] ... with a wild gesture of despair” at Basil's failure to recognise his defeat and the ‘truth’ of Dorian's influence over the art-object.⁷²⁸ There is a cruelty in Dorian's display of the corrupted image that Basil had once described as containing “love in every line” and “passion” “in every touch”, as though Dorian is challenging Basil to repeat his declaration of love and passion for Dorian.⁷²⁹ However, Basil rejects the idea that “[his] romance” remains in the art-object, instead reading only a surfeit of “worship” in it, for which both of them are “punished”.⁷³⁰

It may seem, then, that sexual rejection of the “face of a satyr” lies at the bottom of Dorian's murder of Basil, just as sexual jealousy almost led Basil to destroy the portrait shortly after its creation.⁷³¹ However, it is Dorian's defensive jealousy of his portrait and the story it tells that provokes him. Basil seeks to persuade Dorian to give up his relationship with the art-object through prayer, but Dorian responds with the fatalism that has come to characterise his relationship with the art-object, saying with “tear-dimmed eyes” that “it is too late” for him to free himself.⁷³² Just as a chance encounter with the art-object in the library inaugurates Dorian's awareness of the portrait's magical properties, a single “glance” at “that accursed thing” moves Dorian from tearful sadness to fury, with “an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward c[oming] over him”.⁷³³ It is telling that Dorian's hatred is not of Basil, his old friend who is begging him to pray, but “Basil Hallward”, the artist whose vermilion signature features at the bottom of the art-object. Dorian's hatred seems to derive not from his friend's new knowledge of Dorian's life of sin, although this is what he always feared, but from the presumptuousness of the art-object's original creator trying to use that knowledge to take control of the image once again. The outcome is that Dorian writes his own vermilion signature onto the portrait by murdering Basil with great violence, “stabbing again and again” until a

⁷²⁸ p.189

⁷²⁹ p.144

⁷³⁰ pp.188-9

⁷³¹ p.188

⁷³² p.189

⁷³³ p.190

“loathsome red dew” emerges on the art-object, “wet and glistening, on one of the hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood”.⁷³⁴ Dorian’s defensive jealousy overcomes his feelings of friendship towards Basil, and having destroyed Basil Hallward the artist, Dorian reflects hesitatingly on the loss of Basil his friend: “He felt that the secret of the whole thing was not to realise the situation. The friend who had painted the fatal portrait, the portrait to which all his misery had been due, had gone out of his life. That was enough”.⁷³⁵

This is a pivotal moment in Dorian’s relationship with the art-object, as Dorian finally grasps the art-object’s control over him. Having jealously defended it from communicating its story to anyone else, Dorian begins to seek to limit his *own* knowledge of the art-object by trying to avoid catching sight of its full horror, contrary to his once fervent wish to “see the change taking place before his very eyes”. We can contrast Dorian’s reflection on the loss of his friend with his previous assertion that keeping his youth—despite the “hideous corruption of his soul”—“was enough”.⁷³⁶ Dorian had once sought to reconcile himself to life under the control of the art-object by focusing on what his avaricious jealousy had gained him: his youth and beauty. However, the latter is no longer enough for him to bear calmly the story of corruption told on the painting’s canvas. He seeks to avoid the full knowledge of the consequences of the art-object’s role in his life by refusing to “realise” the horror of Basil’s murder and its representation on the canvas. The portrait prevents him from defining this limit, however, as his rush to be away from it prevents him from concealing it, and when he brings Alan Campbell to the attic to dispose of Basil’s body, “the face of the portrait grin[s]” at him, the blood on its hand plain to see.⁷³⁷ Dorian’s subjection to the art-object prevents him even from refusing to see it. The *Stimmung* that it produces, even lurking on the “dark margins” of Dorian’s attic, has a somatic effect and draws Dorian’s attention even as it did during his first encounter with its changed appearance.⁷³⁸ Hanson suggests that in his life writing, Wilde “gave a peculiar aesthetic form to his pain, and it is only in that

⁷³⁴ p.190, p.205

⁷³⁵ p.191

⁷³⁶ p.153

⁷³⁷ p.205

⁷³⁸ Mary Patricia Kane, *Spurious Ghosts: The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee* (Rome: Carocci, 2006), p.23

form, that appeal to the aesthetic, that he found significance for it”.⁷³⁹ Dorian Gray’s bodily pain and pleasure are given significance beyond the experiential in the art-object, which returns to him those experiences in aesthetic form.

If Dorian had previously denied his own agency in leading a life of sin, he now comes finally to attribute control not to “life” but to the art-object: “it was the portrait that had done everything”.⁷⁴⁰ For a final time, he seeks to wrest back control by creating for himself “a new life”,⁷⁴¹ beginning with his abandonment of Hetty Merton because he fears that he might “ruin” her and “bring her to shame”. Lord Henry, with his clear sight, predicts the end of that story: that Dorian has “broke[n] her heart”, an odd “beginning of your reformation”.⁷⁴² However, Dorian remains convinced that his rejection of Hetty constitutes “the first good action that [he] ha[s] done for years, the first little bit of self-sacrifice that [he] ha[s] ever known”.⁷⁴³ Were it not for the portrait, Dorian might have continued to believe his actions good, but his final encounter with it dashes this hope, making Dorian’s attempted observer effect where he envisages a future meaning for himself as a good man a mere momentary delusion. That final encounter reflects how the effects of the art-object’s presence on Dorian finally overwhelm any aesthetic experience he might have, as the art-object’s oppressive *Stimmung* becomes overwhelming. The art-object’s “effects of presence” dominate any possible “effects of meaning” through hermeneutical thinking in an “aesthetic experience” that eventually renders the art-object an almost pure presence, telling Dorian a story he is neither willing to receive himself nor have transmitted to others.⁷⁴⁴ Having expected to see his good deed reflected in the art-object, he lets out “a cry of pain and indignation” when he realises that the portrait has altered not at all, “unless that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite”. The “scarlet dew” of blood “seemed brighter”, “more like blood newly-spilt”, and

⁷³⁹ ‘Wilde’s Exquisite Pain’, p.104

⁷⁴⁰ *Uncensored*, p.214

⁷⁴¹ p.215

⁷⁴² p.208

⁷⁴³ p.209

⁷⁴⁴ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans by. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.7

extends even to the “hand that had not held the knife” that killed Basil.⁷⁴⁵ The art-object hints that Hetty may have committed suicide, like Sybil and Alan before her. Dorian’s efforts at “renunciation” are thus retold to him as “vanity”, “curiosity”, “hypocrisy”, and the observer effect that had him believing he had saved Hetty reveals instead only a past meaning of destroying her.⁷⁴⁶

Although he declares the portrait “an unjust mirror” for this characterisation, he also begins to wonder whether it is true, whether the art-object not only limits his actions but also dictates his understanding of them. Powell notes that, by the conclusion of the novel, Dorian is “brought into subjection” “by the greater potency of art. The portrait has dictated terms to the person”.⁷⁴⁷ The portrait has not only asserted its own agency, dictating the terms of its own appearance through its data processing, but has subsumed Dorian’s own control over his own self-image, literal and metaphorical. He cannot delude himself into believing his actions good any more than he can cause a wrinkle on his own face.

This subjection exacerbates Dorian’s jealous feelings towards the art-object. He begins to worry again about to whom the portrait might transmit the message that it bears about him, but also to think of the picture solely as “evidence” against him, and in particular of his murder of Basil.⁷⁴⁸ There is a general critical consensus that Dorian destroys the art-object out of guilt. For example, Powell reads the painting’s destruction as a response to the “intolerable reproaches of conscience”,⁷⁴⁹ and Kofman suggests that its appearance constitutes “horrible reproaches” and “criticisms” from which he wishes to free himself.⁷⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Gomel suggests that Wilde “uses ‘morbidity’, the pain and vulnerability of the body, to set limits to art”, suggesting that Dorian destroys the portrait after this threshold has been violated.⁷⁵¹ However, it is clear that Dorian is here troubled less by the reproaches themselves than by their being substantiated in the eyes of others. The

⁷⁴⁵ p.215

⁷⁴⁶ p.216

⁷⁴⁷ ‘Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray’, p.158

⁷⁴⁸ He wonders, “this murder—was it to dog him all his life?” (*Uncensored*, p.216)

⁷⁴⁹ ‘Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray’, p.160

⁷⁵⁰ ‘Imposture of Beauty’, p.32

⁷⁵¹ ‘(Un)death of the Author’, p.79

knowledge of the message that the art-object might transmit to another viewer has begun to “ke[ep] him awake at night”, and “when he had been away, he had been filled with terror lest other eyes should look upon it”.⁷⁵² Powell notes that, in much magic-portrait literature, “the picture is not so much a moral or immoral ‘double’ as a rival aesthetic self which threatens to destroy its real-life counterpart”.⁷⁵³ It is the portrait’s threat to Dorian and to his way of life that spurs him finally to destroy it, to “kill the past” so that “he would be free”.⁷⁵⁴ Avaricious jealousy of the art-object’s agency motivates his final act.

Just as how, in his first encounter with the art-object, Dorian feels the pain of being slashed as a canvas might be, here his attack on the painting is marked by the language of a murder. The canvas is “stabbed”, even though the motion itself is described as clearly vertical, “ripping the thing right up from top to bottom”.⁷⁵⁵ The conflation in this moment is a magical merging of two acts: Dorian’s attempted destruction of the portrait, and his own stabbing. At this point we depart from Dorian’s point of view. When his servants finally break into the room, they find the “splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty” hanging upon the wall, while “lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart”, “withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage”.⁷⁵⁶ Only the rings that he wears give them a clue to the corpse being Dorian Gray.

Conclusion

In discussing the power relationships between media and humans, Mai Wegener identifies the “ambiguity and lack of reconciliation” that arises because “one doesn’t know which part carries ‘true’ victory” or “satisfaction”. Is it “the

⁷⁵² *Uncensored*, p.216

⁷⁵³ ‘Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray’, p.158

⁷⁵⁴ *Uncensored*, p.216

⁷⁵⁵ p.217. In the expanded novel, Dorian destroys not only the portrait but also the mirror that Harry has given him. Powell notes that “the destruction of both portrait and mirror is without precedent in the magic-portrait tradition” and is a “brilliant stroke” by Wilde in “dramatiz[ing] Dorian’s final despairing rejection of the two influences of his life” (‘Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray’, p.165). This additional violence might be read as a rejection not only of both Basil and Henry’s influences, as Powell suggests, but also as a rejection of the process by which he encountered the art-object, prosthetic mirror in hand, in order to prove his own opacity against the painting’s transparency.

⁷⁵⁶ *Uncensored*, p.217

logic of the machine”—for us, the art-object—“or the dancing [human] subjects” that is victorious in any conflict between the two?⁷⁵⁷ *Dorian Gray* hints at how we might answer this question. Apparent order is restored at the end of the novel, with the image-machine returned to its place on the wall rather than out in the world. While the art-object is finally constrained, no longer telling Dorian’s story, this is at his expense. The art-object has retained its power and control, but Dorian has had everything for which he asked: perpetual youth and beauty, and a guide into satisfying his “curiosity” about life. That the media logic of the picture has dictated the course of his life, however, and then imposed upon Dorian its own image, suggests its dominance. Dorian has failed to best the art-object either in opacity or obscurity; its return to beauty conceals the truth of its operation more effectively than Dorian could in his jealous hiding of it.

However, that concealment is laid bare by the novel itself. The final moment of narratorial control over Dorian’s story thus reminds us that his defensive jealousy of the art-object has always been doomed to be unsuccessful, and that the art-object’s self-defensive jealousy, its self-concealment as a medium, is partially withheld. Neither one has prevented us as readers from receiving and understanding at least part of the information that the picture transmits. As Dominic Manganiello has suggested, arguably Basil Hallway’s painting is not the titular picture at all. Rather, the novel itself is the “full portrait” “because it alone captures the chiaroscuro of Dorian’s life” and communicates it to us.⁷⁵⁸ McCormack suggests that “Wilde draws on the deep structure of a kind of tale which ‘pretends to order sequentially, in a narrative, what is actually the destruction of all sequence’”.⁷⁵⁹ The final destruction of the art-object destroys the purported narrative, the links of Dorian’s random sins. Although these are writ again on Dorian’s own flesh, their transposition comes at the loss of their legibility. Only Wilde’s novel continues to tell a story.

⁷⁵⁷ ‘The Humming of Machines: To the End of History and Back’, trans. by Robin Cackett, in *Media After Kittler*, ed. by Ikonidou and Wilson, pp.67-78 (p.72)

⁷⁵⁸ ‘Ethics and Aesthetics in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”’, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 9.2 (1983), 25-33 (p.31). We might think of the phrase “to have the full picture” and its connotations both of having all of the important facts about a situation *and* the effects of that situation on other things.

⁷⁵⁹ ‘Wilde’s Fiction(s)’, p.111, citing Paul de Man, ‘Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion’, in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. by Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), pp.51-69 (p.69)

It is here, perhaps, at the end of this investigation of how media operate, that we might open the door momentarily once again to sociological and biographical concerns, once again yielding to a “psychologizing imperative”.⁷⁶⁰ While the novel demonstrates how Dorian’s “life is structured by art” in a way that eludes his own “self-determination” or “genius”, the novel itself came to have an “unpredictable” hold over its author’s own life, in a way that was also elusive to him. *Dorian Gray* perhaps unwittingly came to provide a model for anti-decadent criticism in the *fin de siècle*, which focused in particular on “read[ing] the flaws and vices of the writer’s body” in art.⁷⁶¹

Like Lee’s supernatural stories, *Dorian Gray* reflects, both narratively and historically, how cultural techniques, which involve bodies in action with things-in-the-world, turn back upon bodies; the subject becomes the object of the object’s action, and these returns are “exquisitely pain[ful]”.⁷⁶² The novel was used in this way most dramatically in Wilde’s own trials, proving symptomatic of the increasing tendency of hostile criticism to focus on the author and their lives, and not merely their work.⁷⁶³ In a classic example of media determining subjects’ situation, as Robert Ziegler suggests, “given the profusion of perverts, neurotics, and addicts ... in Decadent works, it is unsurprising that their authors are sometimes swept into the same taxonomic niche as the pathological specimens whose stories they tell” because “for critics, Decadent creation is seen as a form of teratogenesis, in which authors become monsters by producing unnatural texts”.⁷⁶⁴ Media such as Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, which continued insistently to process and transmit data about sinful, decadent lives, came to determine what could be understood as ‘monstrous’, and such insights were attributed to their creators, rather than the operations of those media. Dorian’s own helplessness in his encounters with his picture, and Wilde’s hopeless efforts to distinguish himself from the data processed in his novel, are two sides to our subordination to media and speak to the case for literary critics addressing media’s operations, and not only their effects.

⁷⁶⁰ Hanson, ‘Wilde’s Exquisite Pain’, p.102

⁷⁶¹ Gomel, ‘(Un)death of the Author’, p.78

⁷⁶² Hanson, ‘Wilde’s Exquisite Pain’

⁷⁶³ Kristen MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siècle* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.80

⁷⁶⁴ *Asymptote: An Approach to Decadent Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p.9

Conclusion

In this study, I have proposed a methodological intervention to correct a tendency in materialist Victorian studies still to yield too much ground to sociological and economic issues of gender, race, sexuality, luxury production, capitalism and class, which cannot get to the heart of the operations of media that have their own logic and act apart from the intentions and desires of their creators, owners, and observers. In turning to the operations of media, I bring contemporary German media history, and in particular the work of Friedrich Kittler, to bear on nineteenth-century media. Of Kittler's theoretical insights, two in particular prove useful to literary studies: the concept of recursion and the concept of a discourse network. Building on the notion of recursion, I also offered my own critical term, the observer effect, to help us better define the experience of recursively encountering an art-object, which allows us both to excavate past and present meanings and produce future meanings of our own. Finally, I suggested that the study of cultural techniques, which has many of its roots in Kittler's thinking, can offer us an additional way to understand the bodily and material act of encountering an art-object.

Although this thesis attended to only a small set of texts, and only a small set of interactions with art, it demonstrates by example that, by reprioritising literature in Kittler's media history, we can use his theoretical framework to interrogate all Victorian texts about media (and that means almost all of them). In doing so, we gain the advantage of clarifying our critical apparatus. In my readings, I suggested ways in which a Kittlerian approach is preferable, both for clarity of expression and clarity of understanding, than some other critical metaphors that are often applied to texts about encountering art-objects, such as the metaphor of "translation" between media, or of "synaesthesia" when we mean a combination, rather than a confusion, of sensory experiences.

Employing this Kittlerian toolkit, I examined what an art-object "completing its purpose" through encounter would look like in discourse network

1890,⁷⁶⁵ and I sought to identify the “operational scripts” of each of the types of encounter that occur within my chosen texts.⁷⁶⁶ In concluding, then, I wish first to summarise the insights from applying this toolkit to each text before broadening out my analysis and finally turning to our own medial situation as critics.

Encounters in discourse network 1890

Throughout this thesis, I read discourse network 1890 as predominantly identifiable in texts through their *Stimmungen*. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has theorised *Stimmung* as a mood or atmosphere that is “articulated in texts other than on the level of representation” because they indicate that a “primary experience has occurred to the point of becoming a preconscious reflex”, allowing the text to become “‘charged’, as if by electricity”.⁷⁶⁷ Generally, I propose that the four texts are examples of how primary experiences with the *fin-de-siècle* technical *a priori*—the competition between photographic and painted portraiture, for example, or the greater awareness of, and anxiety about, unwanted information about the self becoming known—invaded texts, with the individual *Stimmung* of each text influenced by the author’s own position within discourse network 1890.

In the first two chapters, I addressed expressly ekphrastic texts that positioned the reader as the primary observer. Here, I uncovered two different proposed cultural techniques that sought to influence the observer: Michael Field’s pedagogic cultural technique, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s visionary one. These two cultural techniques stem from different approaches to the “gaps” that arise out of what Kittler calls the “transposition” of visual data into verbal data through ekphrasis.⁷⁶⁸ While such gaps exist in all recursions, their presence—unacknowledged or welcomed—in the ekphrastic poetry of Michael

⁷⁶⁵ J. Hillis Miller, ‘What Do Stories about Pictures Want?’, *Critical Inquiry*, 34.2 (2008), 59-97 (p.59)

⁷⁶⁶ Cornelia Vismann, ‘Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty’, trans. by Ilinca Iurascu, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 83-93 (p.87)

⁷⁶⁷ *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.19

⁷⁶⁸ *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. by Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.265

Field and Rossetti proved important for us in understanding the sorts of encounters with art-objects that their texts propose to facilitate for the observer.

In *Sight and Song*, Michael Field purport to eradicate the inevitable gaps of transposition through their “objective” poetry.⁷⁶⁹ The cultural technique that they propose—to sit and absorb the art-object’s message until it “crystallize[s] into words as if by effortless natural laws”—is one that invites the observer who follows them to accept the “natural” interpretations their poems put forth, as though Michael Field’s observer effects were the very last word in appreciating the 31 chosen art-objects.⁷⁷⁰ Here, the art-object completing its purpose means transmitting its “objective” “song” to the observer. This approach gives rise to a *Stimmung* of fixity within the volume, suppressing any prospective observer effects and instead asking the reader simply to learn from Michael Field, who were keenly aware of how the cultural technique of encounter functioned as a method of acculturation in *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic circles. I suggested that this *Stimmung* originated Michael Field’s primary experiences in learning about art and aesthetic appreciation from male mentors and proposed that *Sight and Song* attempts to resist the aesthetic judgments of male art critics by laying claim to objectivity for validity Michael Field’s own interpretations, but in doing so also perpetuates the oppressive atmosphere that they sought to challenge.

In *Ballads and Sonnets*, I propose that Rossetti takes the opposite approach.⁷⁷¹ Although using many of the same stylistic techniques of ekphrastic poetry, such as the use of adverbs of place to guide the observer’s mind’s eye, Rossetti draws attention to the gaps in his transpositions of visual data into verbal, demanding that the observer undertake her own visionary encounter with the art-object. While Michael Field sought to position their poems as the end of a recursive chain, Rossetti draws attention to his observer effects as intermediate results of recursion that should be built upon. Rossetti’s poetry thus combines a *Stimmung* of loss—of authorial control and of the Romantic intimacy between the reader/observer and poet/painter through creative works—with an optimism about the ongoing nature of recursion and the observer effect. This loss of controlling influences from past recursions and the

⁷⁶⁹ *Sight and Song* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892), p.v

⁷⁷⁰ *Works and Days*, vol. 3, London, British Library, Add MS 46778, fol.103^v

⁷⁷¹ *Ballads and Sonnets* (London: F.S. Ellis, 1881)

inevitable data loss of transposition provide the observer with an opportunity. The art-object completing its purpose in these ekphrastic poems is thus, I suggest, best interpreted as perpetuating the recursive chain of observer effects that leads back to it.

In the final two chapters, I examined texts where the reader is not in a secondary position, observing observers in texts that are all about the functioning of art-objects upon subjects from the margins of everyday life. Here too, *Stimmung* was an important component in understanding the depicted encounters, and I also employed Gumbrecht's theory of presence in order to interrogate the physical nature of the cultural technique of encounter that is more clearly visible in these prose narratives than in lyric poetry.

In reading Vernon Lee's *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, I resisted interpretations of the book as setting out an ethical framework for treating art-objects, as it seems to me impossible to draw parallels between the variations in observers' physical and mental suffering through haunting and their treatment of art-objects.⁷⁷² Instead, I suggest that we read the volume in the light of Lee's proposal in 'Faustus and Helena' that we must content ourselves with never truly sharing the products of our observer effects with others.⁷⁷³ In *Hauntings*, art-objects come to haunt observers through encounters that often take place by chance, or repeatedly over a long period of time, with paintings and places influencing their observers from the literal and metaphorical "dark margins" of their lives.⁷⁷⁴ The cultural technique of encounter that Lee thus describes is outside of the observer's control, relying far more on what Walter Sickert called an art-object's capacity to "[tell] its story of sympathy and comprehension through years of silent appeal" from the wall.⁷⁷⁵ That art-objects are decentred only enhances their power, however. Through examining all of the hauntings that take place throughout the volume, we can conclude that art-objects completing their purpose means invading the mind of the observer, influencing

⁷⁷² *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, 2nd edition (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1906)

⁷⁷³ 'Faustus and Helena', in *Belcaro, being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: W. Satchell, 1881), pp.70-105

⁷⁷⁴ Mary Patricia Kane, *Spurious Ghosts: The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee* (Rome: Carocci, 2006), p.23

⁷⁷⁵ *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Anna Gruetzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.168

their behaviour by transmitting new “commands” to them.⁷⁷⁶ So, for example, Waldemar undertakes to sculpt a woman, a project he once disdained.⁷⁷⁷

Finally, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* depicts an apotheosis of the autonomous art-object.⁷⁷⁸ I suggest that Dorian’s portrait subordinates him utterly to its own media logic, with his appearance, emotions, and actions become restricted by its (supernatural) technical standards. The art-object’s control over him through its “commands” is absolute. At first, however, that fact is obscured from Dorian by the overwhelming feeling of jealousy that he feels towards it. In my reading, I propose that jealousy is the primary characteristic of the encounters that he, and the other characters of the novel, have with the art-object, which we can link to the ironic, *fin-de-siècle* aesthete’s desire to appropriate art’s opacity and obscurity for himself, which has become a *Stimmung* in Wilde’s novel.⁷⁷⁹ The art-object’s resistance to this, dramatised by Wilde in its changing appearance, only increases Dorian’s jealousy of it. The art-object completing its purpose in this form of encounter, then, means taking control of the observer effect entirely. Dorian’s jealous encounters cannot produce future meanings for the art-object because it always precedes him, processing the data of his life before he has even perceived it. Thus, the cultural technique that he enacts in the novel is bifurcated: he looks from the picture to an image of himself in the mirror and back again, as it is impossible for him to achieve the simultaneous, imaginative vision that is the stuff of the observer effect.

In the work of Michael Field and Rossetti, I suggest that the future meanings produced via observer effects illustrate how texts and traditional art forms, which appeared at risk of being superseded by photography and film at the *fin-de-siècle*, resist marginalisation. In the fiction of Lee and Wilde, the continued power of traditional art-objects is undeniable and irresistible, albeit

⁷⁷⁶ ‘Geschichte der Kommunikationsmedien’, in *Raum und Verfahren*, ed. Jörg Huber and Alois-Martin Müller (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1993), p.170, translated and cited with the German references in Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, ‘Silicon Sociology, or, Two Kings on Hegel’s Throne? Kittler, Luhmann and the Posthuman Merger of German Media Theory’, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13.2 (2000), 391-420 (p.409).

⁷⁷⁷ ‘Dionea’, in *Hauntings*, pp.61-103

⁷⁷⁸ *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012)

⁷⁷⁹ Andrew Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011)

threatening. In all four texts, however, the notional supplanting of literature and traditional art by technical media is opposed.

The materialities of cultural techniques

Although I describe these four types of encounters in at times abstract and psychological ways—pedagogic, visionary, haunted, jealous—I also attended to the very real materiality to each cultural technique: Michael Field’s patient and attentive “method of art-study”; Rossetti’s “stunning” of the observer’s inner eye and inner ear, which she must work to resist; the inescapability of seeing that Lee highlights; and Wilde’s depiction of obsessive inspections of visual data. In each case, we can see how the form of cultural technique that the texts depict are, just as Markus Krajewski argues, “designed to carry out an action that develops cultural efficacy in a specific way through the interplay of purposeful bodily gestures and the use of aids such as tools, instruments or other medial objects”.⁷⁸⁰ The sort of cultural efficacy that each one might develop is also clear from our knowledge of discourse network 1890: a mode of behaviour applicable to social visits to galleries and museums, or attending art-lectures; developing an artistic, visionary intuition that might allow one to produce beautiful meanings even out of loss or suffering; navigating the increasingly pervasive visual landscape that might bombard the subject with noise; or appreciating art as a refined, often solitary pastime.

Of course, each cultural technique that I have described is also an aesthetic one. Beyond understanding the role of the body and the object in the operation of each cultural technique, these four texts allow us to think more generally about the materiality of aesthetic experiences. In his theory of presence, which is heavily linked with his method of reading for *Stimmung*, Gumbrecht highlights that while our relationships with things, such as art-objects, appear to have “the ascription of meaning” at their crux, those things always “stand in a necessary relationship to our bodies”.⁷⁸¹ By recognising that materiality, we can strive to avoid the “systematic deception” that arises when

⁷⁸⁰ ‘Small Gestures: On the Cultural Technique of Service’, trans. by Charles Marcrum, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 94-109 (p.94)

⁷⁸¹ *Stimmung*, p.6

we rely too heavily “on concepts such as understanding and subjectivity”,⁷⁸² and in doing so we can understand our “aesthetic experience” of art-objects as deriving from a “tension-filled simultaneity of effects of meaning”—our hermeneutical thinking—“and effects of presence”.⁷⁸³ Think, for a moment, of Michael Field’s suggestion, developing an idea from Gustave Flaubert, that: “We must, by an effort of will, transport ourselves to the pictures and not bring them to us”.⁷⁸⁴ It begins to become clear why studies of ekphrasis so often discuss the ‘presencing’ of art-objects through texts, and ekphrastic literature’s relationship to presence, as it is essential for the aesthetic experience one would expect from ekphrasis.

Beyond the physical interaction of body and art-object, then, “presence” is also key to our understanding of these cultural techniques. That “presence” can, of course, be metaphorical, including the visual imagining that results from readers’ functioning as *camera obscuras* for texts and poetry’s capacity to produce an aural sensation in the body “like a touch from inside”.⁷⁸⁵

In my chapters on the poetry of Michael Field and Rossetti, “presence” is indeed metaphorical, except for explicit descriptors of Michael Field’s own experience of encountering art-objects in galleries; what “touch[es]” the observer’s body does experience are, indeed, “touch[es] from the inside”. On the other hand, the stories that Lee and Wilde tell situate the observer and art-object physically in relation to one another, and presence becomes one of the key tools that old media use against to subjects. Lee’s art-objects lurking on the “dark margins” of her characters’ lives are an excellent example. As Gumbrecht notes, our “everyday experience” “registers” only “effects of presence”: we are aware of paintings on the wall in our peripheral vision, or in idle moments; we try not to walk into sculptures or knock over vases.⁷⁸⁶ When the art-object

⁷⁸² Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury, ‘Introduction’, in *Kittler Now*, ed. by Stephan Sale and Laura Salisbury (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), p.xxx. See *Optical Media*, in which Kittler draws on Hans Blumenberg’s discussion of the “postulate of visibility” (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. by Robert M Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), pp.361-75) to suggest that technical media “destroy” that idea that “that which exists also allows itself in principle to be seen”—by concealing themselves (trans. by Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p.39).

⁷⁸³ *Stimmung*, p.7, original emphasis

⁷⁸⁴ “Il faut, par un effort d’esprit, se transporter dans les [peintures] et non les attirer à soi”, *Sight and Song*, p.5, my translation

⁷⁸⁵ Gumbrecht, *Stimmung*, p.40

⁷⁸⁶ *ibid*

transmits “commands” to us, however, as often seems to happen accidentally, “effects of meaning”, and thus an “aesthetic experience”, are foisted upon us. Spiridion, for example, seeking an exit after a long day at work on his history, is thrust into an encounter with Medea da Carpi’s portrait by a chance glance in a mirror.⁷⁸⁷

Bill Brown’s description of encountering things—art-objects or otherwise—emphasises this “contingency” as an inherent fact of interacting somatically with things-in-the-world. He suggests that, in the moment of encounter, there is a “suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power”.⁷⁸⁸ It is “effects of meaning” that elevate such encounters from quotidian ones that rely only on effects of presence. I suggest that such effects of meaning are a matter of recursion and the observer effect, recuperating past meanings and returning them to the present in order to produce future meanings. The sudden eruption of Medea’s portrait into Spiridion’s consciousness is an aesthetic experience, then, because the effect of presence—his unconscious, peripheral awareness of an object’s existence near him—is transformed by the effects of meaning that begin in his moment’s recognition of its visual content, when he begins to compare it to the portraits of Medea that he has seen before. The art-object’s materiality is key to its appreciation.

Ways forward

At this point, it becomes necessary to acknowledge our own situation in discourse network 2000 (or 2010, or 2020, the most appropriate periodisation perhaps being a matter for historical perspective), from which we investigate and imagine the encounters of real or fictional observers with art-objects. In the first instance, if “the critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impressions of beautiful things”, then we must at least recognise and account for the medial nature of those impressions.⁷⁸⁹ Medial change

⁷⁸⁷ ‘Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka’, in *Hauntings*, pp.3-58 (pp.31-2)

⁷⁸⁸ ‘Thing Theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 (2001), 1-22 (pp.3-4)

⁷⁸⁹ Oscar Wilde, ‘Preface’, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981; repr. 1998), pp.xxiii-xxiv (p.xxiii)

throughout discourse network 1900, with the rise of further technical, and later digital, media, has left critics of discourse network 2000 with a new set of tools with which to encounter and examine Victorian texts and images. Our technical *a priori* is one of Google Images, archive.org, and a range of author-specific digital archives, several of which are cited in this thesis, that reproduce manuscripts, books and images through high-specification photography and other means. Accordingly, I have not read the work of my four authors in the same way as their contemporary readers, or even in the same way as the critics whose work I have cited. Three of my primary texts I have not read in paper copies, but only digitally (Nicholas Frankel's recently published edition of *Dorian Gray* is the exception). Many of the actual art-objects described I have not seen 'in the flesh'.

How much does this matter? Were this study a study purely of the effects of presence, or of aesthetic experience, it might matter a great deal. I suggest, however, that my Kittlerian toolkit, focused on processes and operations, allows us to look beyond these differences in order to recognise instead the commonalities. In looking at Rossetti's paintings on the Rossetti Archive, we are still undertaking a recursion, seeking to recover past meanings of an individual art-object.⁷⁹⁰ As we do so with the help of the Archive's insightful commentary, we also become aware of our position as somewhere in a recursive chain, separated from Rossetti's original art-object by our medial circumstances and the critical observer effects that precede us. This is a new effect of presence, of *digital* presence.

Although Kittler situates the downfall of literature's monopoly as a medium in the mid-nineteenth century, and "the idea of culture-as-text is eroding", as Sybille Krämer argues, it is still "in the (inter)play with language, images, writing, and machines" "that cultures emerge and reproduce".⁷⁹¹ The role of discourse network 2000's new machines must be acknowledged, but it is to the emergence and reproduction of specific moments of Victorian culture, including their recursive continuation in discourse network 2000, that I attend.

⁷⁹⁰ As a corollary, perhaps, we may find that presentism, often criticised in scholarship, is as valid an observer effect as any other.

⁷⁹¹ 'Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques – Moving Beyond Text', trans. by Michael Wutz, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.6 (2013), 20-29 (pp.23-4)

While presentism, much criticised in scholarship, must logically be acknowledged as a critical observer effect produced by the same means as any other, I have sought as best I can to historicise with the help of the texts themselves and the *Stimmungen* that they have “absorb[ed]” and can “offer ... up for experience in [our] new present”.⁷⁹² In doing so, this thesis seeks to go some way to contributing to what Kittler suggested, in his last public address, is the mission of media history: “a singular opportunity” “to continue to think and continue to pass down the history of Europe as our history”.⁷⁹³

In this thesis, then, I have sought to demonstrate the utility of a Kittlerian toolkit, allowing his theories and ideas the same space to inform literary criticism as has so often been given to the work of the Frankfurt School. In doing so, I have eschewed many of the analyses of identities that have informed recent approaches to my chosen authors. However, whilst useful for illustrative purposes, there are many ways in which a Kittlerian toolkit might be brought together productively with such approaches, and in particular with queer, feminist, and post-colonialist theories.

Although the conception of a discourse network and a technical *a priori* can be highly generalising, the idea also contains the potential for more specific applications that target locations and groups. What media might men in a certain society at a certain point in time access that are not accessible to women, for example? Similarly, the study of cultural techniques, with its focus on bodies interacting with things, invites the question: whose body? How might an analysis of cultural techniques allow us to illuminate the differences and commonalities between what happens when a feminised, queer, racialised, or differently abled bodies are in play? In my close readings, I have made only the first gestures toward how we might—and might not—be able to drill down into these specificities while maintaining a focus on “our situation”, rather than our subjectivities. Further critical analysis is now essential to examine these new avenues, which may bring this branch of media history into contact with the other theoretical approaches that guide literary criticism today.

⁷⁹² Gumbrecht, *Stimmung*, p.16

⁷⁹³ ‘Farewell to Sophienstraße’, trans. by Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan and Christian Kassung, *Critical Inquiry*, 42 (2016), 959-962 (p.962)

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